

exhortation, which kills the laughter in people, kills also their chances of really emerging from failures and frailties into something which has about it a touch of greatness.

Tears, but never of self-pity; laughter, but never corrosive: these can help a man to take humbly to God the broken shards of failure, knowing that the divine creative and re-creative skill will not be lacking, or denied him. For a failure given to God ungrudgingly can be a form of that re-creative death of which St Paul tells us: 'You know well enough that we who were taken up by Christ into his baptism have been taken up, all of us, into his death. In our baptism we have been buried with him, died like him, that so, just as Christ was raised up by his Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence.'

## FREDERICK OZANAM, CHRISTIAN AND DEMOCRAT

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**T**HE centenary of the death of Frederick Ozanam has passed practically unnoticed. A few articles in the Catholic Press, a couple of small and unpretentious works from Ireland,<sup>1</sup> a meeting of the Brothers of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Paris; this seems a meagre tribute to pay to one of the greatest Catholic laymen of our time. The reason is, I think, that Ozanam presents a difficult problem for many of his most fervent admirers. They are attracted by his spirituality, his deep sense of Christian charity, his love of God and of the poor. But there is a whole side of Ozanam which is out of keeping with what English Catholic publicists are pleased to call the 'Catholic

<sup>1</sup> *The Secret of Frederick Ozanam*. By The Rev. Edward O'Connor, S.J. (M. H. Gill and Son, Ltd.; 5s.)

*Humble of Heart*. By Charles K. Murphy. (The Mercier Press; 3s. 6d.)

tradition'. He was a man of bold and original views, a republican, a radical and a democrat at a time when most French Catholics were devoted to the principles of absolute monarchy; he had an intense dislike for aggressive apologetics, and showed to Protestants and unbelievers a spirit of tolerance which many considered to be treason to the Faith. The failure of the revolution of 1848, the dictatorship of Louis Napoleon and the rejection of democracy by Pius IX, dealt a crushing blow to all the social and political ideals of Christian democracy for which Ozanam had fought, and his hagiographers have therefore had a tendency to suppress or tone down the more awkward facts, presenting us with edifying little biographies, full of touching and pious incidents, which fail absolutely to give us an idea of his striking originality.

Ozanam was probably the very first Catholic to realise the importance of the problems created by the Industrial Revolution, and as far back as 1836, at the age of twenty-three he wrote to a friend: 'The question which divides men today is no longer a political question, it is a social question; it is to know whether the spirit of egoism or the spirit of sacrifice will prevail, whether society will be one gigantic exploitation for the benefit of the strongest or a consecration of each for the good of all, and above all for the protection of the weak. There are many men who have too much, there are many more who have not got enough, who have got nothing, and who will take if it is not given to them. Between these two classes of men a struggle is preparing, and the struggle threatens to become terrible; on the one side the power of gold, on the other the strength of despair. Between these two armies, we must throw ourselves, if not to prevent, at least to diminish the shock.' Ozanam had few illusions about the grimness of the class struggle, although we may smile at his idea of Catholics acting in the unenviable and rather futile position of shock-absorbers. Three years earlier, he had, with a small group of friends, founded the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, not, as has been so often asserted, in order to give the 'Catholic answer' to the social problems of his time, but as a gesture of love towards the poor in whom he saw the image of Christ. The Society of St Vincent de Paul bears the stamp of his genius, and in addition to the

tremendous amount of charitable work it has done all over the world, it did much to save the French working classes from complete de-christianisation by creating the movement of the *Patronages*. It also brought men from the aristocracy and the middle classes into close personal contact with the proletariat, and there is hardly a single Catholic who has contributed to the development of the social teaching of the Church, who did not first discover his vocation when working as a Brother in the S.V.P. On that score alone, the debt of Catholics to Ozanam is immense.

When Ozanam was appointed to the chair of Commercial Law at the University of Lyons in 1839, he revealed remarkable gifts as an economist and a social thinker. His lectures during that year created a sensation and constitute a most important contribution to Catholic social teaching. Fifty years before *Rerum Novarum* he denounced the condition of the working classes as slavery and called for far-reaching social reforms, profit-sharing and even pensions for all working men!

It seems a tragedy that Ozanam should have abandoned political economy after only one year. It is tempting to think of the influence that Catholics might have exercised over the working classes, had he continued his studies and lectures and gathered round him a strong group of socially-minded Catholics who could have challenged the growing influence of socialism. But his acceptance of the chair of foreign literature at the Sorbonne is understandable enough. The influence of the Church in academic circles in France had fallen to a degree that we cannot even imagine today. For over fifty years, not a single Catholic had lectured in the Sorbonne; and Ozanam, who had had to endure insults to his faith during the whole of his undergraduate life, felt that his influence would be of more use there than in a provincial town. But although he did a great deal to restore the prestige of Catholics in University circles, although his career as a lecturer was a remarkable one, although he contributed greatly to the development of the study of Dante, and re-discovered for our delight the *Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, his significance does not lie in his achievement as a scholar. Few Catholics ever practised more scrupulously the

commandment to love our neighbour. 'He was', says Lacordaire, 'gentle to all men and kind towards error', and he hated above all things the aggressive type of apologetics, then very popular in the French Catholic press, which, he said, 'serves only to stir up the passions of believers'. A passionate love of God, and as a consequence, an intense love of his fellow men is the greatest feature of Ozanam's life. This led him to hate conflict; but he saw around him nothing but conflict which was unnecessary and harmful to the cause of the Church. It was his hatred of conflict which made him champion the working classes and their rights, and it was the same hatred of futile conflict which made him deplore the obstinate attachment of French Catholics to the monarchy. At a time when the theorists of the counter-revolution were making a dangerous confusion between the spiritual and the temporal and were claiming for an obsolete form of government a spiritual and social significance which it had never possessed, Ozanam contended that Catholics had no right to compromise the Church by associating her with the cause of the monarchy. The last and most important effort of his life was his attempt to reconcile the Church with the modern world, with democracy and with the working classes, a reconciliation which he judged essential to the Church's mission of spreading the gospel.

As the revolutionary spirit of 1848 gathered strength, Catholics began to take fright, and many like Montalembert started to talk of the 'new barbarians' who were beginning to threaten the very foundations of civilised society. Ozanam, who had been preparing his *Etudes Germaniques*, had made a deep study of the barbarian invasions of the fifth century, and had been struck by the resemblance with his own times. It must have indeed been tempting for the Church in that dark and dangerous period of history, when the old Roman world was reeling under the blows of the barbaric hordes from the East, to have taken a despairing view of the future. The greatest and most powerful civilisation that the world had ever known, christianised with so much effort, after so many sacrifices, at the cost of so much blood of so many martyrs, was now threatened with extinction, and it must have seemed obvious to many that the Church should give

the lead, that she should link her destiny with that of the Roman Empire and mobilise all forces to defend it at all costs. But the Church did not do this; she did not and she could not link her destiny with that of the Roman Empire. She was conscious that her mission is not to bolster up a social order but to baptise *all* men, and when Saint Remigius baptised Clovis and his warriors in the cathedral of Rheims, she passed over to the barbarians, and thereby began fifteen centuries of Christian civilisation in Europe. Ozanam reminded Catholics of all this in a famous article in *Le Correspondant* which scandalised his contemporaries and which is either hardly mentioned or carefully bowdlerised by his pious biographers. Stirred by the news of the liberal reforms which Pius IX had instituted in the Papal States, he imagined that the papacy was leaving 'the deathbed of absolute monarchy . . . to turn towards democracy, towards the barbarians of modern times, whose violent instincts and hardness of heart she does not ignore. But she sees in the first place the large number, the infinite number of souls which must be reconquered and saved, secondly the poverty that God loves, the poverty that gives strength, that does not bargain its blood or its sweat, to whom the future belongs. That is why the papacy is passing over to the barbarians.' And he adds: 'Let us overcome our dislikes and our grudges, and turn towards democracy, towards the people, who do not know us. Let us not only preach to them but be kind to them, let us help them not only by alms, which put men under an obligation, but by our efforts to obtain those institutions which will make them free and will make them better. Let us pass over to the barbarians and follow Pius IX.'

In order to propagate these ideas amongst Catholics, Ozanam and a group of friends, who included Lacordaire and the Abbé Maret, founded a paper, *L'Ere Nouvelle*, which had initially a great success. But after the riots of June 1848 and the proclamation of the Roman Republic, Catholics were so frightened that they had no wish to go over to the new barbarians. In the case of Pius IX it was his concern to safeguard the liberty of the Church; in the case of many others, it was the less noble but equally understandable concern for the safety of their property. No one was

willing, like Ozanam, to see the events of the day in their wider historical context. And so Catholics began to yearn nostalgically for another Constantine, for a 'strong man', for a dictator who would keep the working classes in their proper place, who would preserve order and property, and who would protect and defend the Church. Ozanam had no time for this counsel of cowardice and despair. 'We have not faith enough', he exclaimed, 'we are always looking for the re-establishment of religion by political means; we dream of a Constantine who, with one blow and one effort, would bring back the nations to the fold. The fact is, we don't really know the history of Constantine—how he became a Christian precisely because half the world was already Christian—how the crowds of sceptics, scoffers and courtiers who thronged after him into the Church only brought with them hypocrisy, scandal and relaxation. . . . Let us abjure and abhor the sloth and cowardliness that would prompt us to call to our aid the proselytism of the State.'

When Ozanam died at the age of forty in September 1853, all the social and political ideas for which he had fought so enthusiastically, so brilliantly, had suffered a crushing defeat. They had been defeated by the timorous, by the pessimists, by those who had little faith in God or in their fellow men. But the faith of Ozanam, his love and consequently his trust in his fellow men were too great for him to view the future of the Church and of the world with pessimism or despair. 'Can we suppose for a moment', he exclaimed, 'that the temporal destinies of Christianity have reached their final issue, and that God has nothing more to do with the world except to judge it? . . . This is what I hope and trust I shall never say, not if I saw the whole of modern society perish, assured, as I am, that it would cost God less to raise up a new race, a new society, than to limit the work of his Son's blood to the little that these eighteen centuries have accomplished.'