

Interview with Raymond Sickinger

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Mr. Raymond Sickinger is Professor of History and Chair of the Department of History and Classics at the Catholic University, “Providence College”, Rhode Island, USA. In 2017, he published a book entitled Antoine Frédéric Ozanam, considered by some critics as the “definitive biography on Ozanam in English”

1. **Professor Sickinger, your biography, Antoine Frédéric Ozanam has been commended by the critics, and the US National Catholic Press Association has awarded you first prize for your book. Have you made new discoveries about Ozanam, while writing this book?**

Raymond L. Sickinger: There were a number of new discoveries. Let me mention five. First, the chapter on systemic change demonstrates that Ozanam thought in a systemic way even though he never used the term systemic change that is current in the Vincentian Family. This was evident from the time of his first home visit. He recognized that people can be trapped into poverty because of their circumstances and the policies of governments. Second, the chapter on solidarity (Catholic Social Thought) demonstrates that Ozanam was not just a forerunner of modern Catholic Social Thought, but his ideas embraced most of that tradition. Third, his work in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was not just charity, as some have implied. Rather he saw and embraced the necessary link of charity and justice that the Church in the 21st century has again emphasized as essential. Fourth, Ozanam did not become a supporter of democracy overnight. It was during the home visits he made between 1833 and 1848 that he became aware of the fundamental goodness of those he visited and saw that they had the right to be able to share in the decisions that affected their lives. In that process of realization, he moved away from being a royalist in his youth to a supporter of Christian democracy. The book outlines that process. Fifth, the book also suggests that the Catholic Worker Movement led by Dorothy Day was influenced in positive ways by Ozanam's thoughts. Day read Ozanam and was deeply moved by his example. Finally, for most Americans, Ozanam is someone they do not know. There has been no comprehensive biography in English on Ozanam in a long time. The book was intended then not only for scholars and Vincentians, but also for readers who want to encounter a man of deep faith and principles. They can discover Ozanam in a meaningful way. Some critics have said the book will be the "definitive biography on Ozanam in English." Only time will tell if that is true.

2. **Tell us about Ozanam's spiritual life. What place did he give to prayer in the course of his day?**

Raymond L. Sickinger: Ozanam's life was a profound forty-year long spiritual journey. He understood that everything he did as a person, teacher, scholar, husband, father, and friend had a spiritual dimension and could bring him, and others, closer to God. In my research, and while reading his letters, it became evident to me that prayer was essential to him. He began each morning by praying and by reading scripture (preferably in Greek). His devotion to the Blessed Mother is evident from his youth in Lyons to his death on her feast day. It was her kindly love he turned to when his own mother died. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul was a means for him to pray in action. By serving others, Ozanam knew that he could see the face of Christ more distinctly and that prayer with a community of believers is one of the most important ways to reinforce one's faith and to grow spiritually.

3. **For Ralph Middlecamp, National President in the United States, your book "*gives us not just the story of an interesting man living at an interesting time, but also a clear picture of why he should still matter to us today*". What parallels do you draw between Ozanam's time and ours?**

Raymond L. Sickinger: Ozanam's times were like ours: unsettled with great political divisions, economic disparities, and social problems. The Church then, as now, was criticized for not being responsive enough and for its failures to discipline its clergy. Ozanam saw the lay person as the one who could bring people back to the Church and create bonds of trust. That is true today as well. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul can play the same role today as it did in Ozanam's time. His message and his example is as relevant today as it was in the 19th century.

- **It is often said that Ozanam's writings were prophetic. In what ways do you think Ozanam is up to date for us today?**

Raymond L. Sickinger: Ozanam understood that if great economic disparities and social divisions were not addressed then society would disintegrate. The focus on personal interests alone (egoism) was a detriment to society. Only by building authentic community and maintaining the dignity of each and every person can we create a just world. He knew that there were systems in place that kept people in poverty and that those systems were unjust. There is no doubt in my mind that Ozanam has much to say to our present world. Although he was a French layman, he saw beyond the boundaries of his France. His was an international and Catholic vision for regeneration in a changing world. His hope to create a network of charity, not only in France, but beyond its borders, is one that can still inspire us today. He is particularly inspirational for young people. In my classes that I teach, my students greet Ozanam very positively because they see in him a young man who wanted to make his world a better place just as they want to do. And they are impressed with what he accomplished in such a short lifetime.

**You can order this book on Amazon or by clicking the link below:
University of Notre Dame Press:**

<http://undpress.nd.edu/9780268101428/antoine-frederic-ozanam/>