

Serve to Learn and Learn to Serve
SVDP Ozanam Day at St. Peter's
45 Minutes

Given that we've gathered to celebrate 'OZANAM DAY' – he who once stated: "***I would like to embrace the World in a network of Charity...***" and then from there, he went on to found The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul back in 1833 – **a society that to this day serves as a CHANNEL OF CHARITY born out from Heaven and pouring for throughout the earth in over 140 countries touching the lives of millions of people** – IT'S ONLY FITTING that we briefly touch upon a moment in his life that sparked this man into action.

First we begin with the context: 200 years ago, Paris was a city that was recovering from the aftereffects of the French Revolution, which saw the overthrow of King Charles X in 1848. It's in the midst of this great upheaval that a young man by the name of **JEAN-ANTOINE**, a doctor, and his wife **MARIE** – **gave whatever time they could to the poor by means of providing medical care while raising their own family and trying to establish a medical practice.**

They had 14 children: **11 of them died...** One of their **THREE SURVIVING CHILDREN** became known to the rest of the world as **FREDRIC OZANAM**! Historians claim that if there's just one word that could sum up the entirety of this man's life, that one word would be '**HOPE.**' For he always believed there was a **Better Way**, a more **Just Way**, a more **Compassionate Way** and **HE NEVER LOST THAT 'HOPE.'**

He believed that with and through his Faith, he could make a difference in the world and in the lives of those around him. He had a simple motto:

"NO TIME LIKE NOW!" 2x

At the tender age of 19, he left the confines of a sheltered Country Catholic Life and entered the chaos of Paris. He studied law at the University of Sorbonne and it was there that he first encountered professors who mocked Catholic teachings coupled with a pervading attitude among intellectuals that insisted how Priests and Bishops were now nothing more than **HATED PARTNERS OF a RUINED CLASS**.

This proved to be a HUGE adjustment for Frederic who lived off Campus in a boarding house. While the majority of other students flourished in their own way under the ILLUSION of all this newfound freedom, Frederic felt isolated... and so he began a **DEBATE GROUP** that met each week in order to **discuss IF CHRISTIANITY and the so-called 'Progressive New World' could actually exist hand-in-hand.**

Frederic believed that HIS FAITH, as a Catholic, could help the New World become a **JUST WORLD.** Meanwhile, many at the University viewed Christianity as the enemy of social progress – (***THAT WAS 200 years ago in Paris, France... If I didn't know any better, I'd say it's a reflection of modern-day universities here in North America coupled with the prevailing attitude of governing bodies throughout this country***)

But that **DIDN'T TAKE THE WIND OUT OF THE SAILS** of **Frederic's** desire to see the reality of his Faith give rise to a movement that would soon influence **SOCIAL and POLITICAL STRUCTURES** in such a way that **JUSTICE and CHARITY**, virtues born out of the heart of Christ's pierced side, would soon touch the hearts of millions.

The penny dropped for **Frederic** when during one of his **DEBATE GROUP MEETINGS**, soon after he had just spoken about Christianity's role in civilization, one of the members said: "**Let us be frank, Mr. Ozanam; let us also be very particular. What do you do BESIDES TALK to prove the Faith you claim is in you?**" Those words pierced him straight through the heart – and soon began gnawing away at his conscience...

As it was that day for **Frederic Ozanam** – so I invite it to be so for all of us gathered here this morning – allow for such a question to penetrate DEEP on the inside of your life’s Daily Fabric:

"Let us be frank, AND let us also be very particular. What do you do BESIDES TALK to prove the Faith you claim is in you?"

What is it about the Faith we claim EXISTS inside of each of our hearts? Why is it that this Faith inspires some men and women to greatness when it comes to making a difference in our world for the good – **people like Frederic Ozanam, Mother Teresa** – while at one and the same time, that same supposed Faith existing within the hearts of millions seems to barely make any difference at all in family lives, in schools, and governing political structures?

The answer lies in **HOW CLOSE WE as individuals KEEP THE FACE OF CHRIST BEFORE THE EYES OF OUR HEARTS ON A DAILY BASIS**... Anyone and everyone on earth who claims to share in the inheritance that’s been given to us through the Catholic Faith, if the example and witness of their lives are to make an impact for the glory of God’s existence within the context of the chaos and darkness that now reigns over mankind, then we all have a divine imperative to consciously **KEEP THE FACE OF CHRIST** continually at the forefront of our every day **NOW!**

George and Mary-Lou were celebrating 50 years of marriage and during the reception, one of his friends:

"So tell us George - what’s your recipe for a LONG, HAPPY MARRIAGE?"

George got up, took the mic. and went on to explain how on their wedding day, his father-in-law had taken him aside and handed him a small box.

Inside the box was a beautifully appointed **gold watch**, which he still wore to this day. Across the face of the watch, which he saw at least A DOZEN TIMES A DAY, were etched in the words: "**SAY SOMETHING NICE TO MARY LOU...**"

As it was for George being reminded at least a dozen times a day about how to be in relationship with his wife, so it ought to be for all of us as believers in Jesus Christ who suffered the cross out of love for us in order that we might live forever in the kingdom of heaven – **PEOPLE OF TRUE FAITH** – like Frederic: **think about, stare at and contemplate** HIS PRESENCE IN THEIR LIVES not just when they pray in the morning or at night, but at least a dozen times a day!! That's what it means to keep the face of Christ continually at the forefront of our every day **NOW!**

Do we really want to **SERVE IN ORDER TO LEARN**? Then serve the King who came to serve and not to be served... Do you want to **LEARN BY MEANS OF SERVING**? Then learn from He who was sent from above and walked among us Meek and Gentle of Heart offering rest for Troubled Souls...

For as it was for **Frederic**, for **Mother Theresa**, and all the great Saints that have ever walked this earth – so it **MUST** be for all of us: Christ must be first and foremost at the center of who we are, what we do, and why we do it. All other reasons will serve for a while, but in the end, **it's ONLY CHRIST that endures into eternity.**

But that's not what our Western world wants to hear! That's not what people in Paris wanted to hear some 200 years ago. The ever ongoing presence and the frequent resurgence of all the promises made by way of **"EASY CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS"** are a stark reminder of this. Well over 30,000 different kinds of Christian denominations existing on planet Earth these days. Why over 30,000?

Because each of them INTERPRETS TRUTH THROUGH THEIR OWN LENS OF UNDERSTANDING – which always means a relaxation of the moral life and the Commandments given to us by God himself.

Most people nowadays, Christians included, want a religion akin to **ready made FAST FOOD**: something that requires little or no preparation, little understanding, very little time or commitment – and yet at one and the same time, will serve to **SATISFY THEIR NEEDS for THE MOMENT**.

I love the way theologian **RICHARD NIEBUHR** criticized this tendency by summarizing a Christianity that people seem to desire these days with these words: PEOPLE WANT “*A God without wrath who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross...*”

Truth be told, the true **THE FACE OF JESUS** encountered by **Frederic Ozanam** and all the saints of old is one that very few people like to paint for themselves at the forefront of their minds, but it is the one that was revealed to us by He who love the world so much, that “*He sent His Only Begotten Son*” so that we, through Him, might be called to something quite different than what we – in OUR FALLEN STATE OF BEING – desire.

Catholicism is not an *Easy Religion*; at the centre of the Good News of Salvation STANDS ‘**A DEATH**,’ and not just any death but **THE DEATH OF THE SON OF GOD HIMSELF**. As the Catechism states: “The Paschal mystery of Christ's cross and Resurrection stands at the centre of the Good News that the apostles, and the Church following them, are to proclaim to the world. God's saving plan was accomplished "once for all" by the redemptive death of his Son Jesus Christ.” (571)

The Church remains faithful to the interpretation of "ALL THE SCRIPTURES" that Jesus gave both before and after his Passover: “*Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?*” Jesus' sufferings took their historical, concrete form from the fact that he was "rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes", who handed "him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified". (572)

And so it is that Christ warns his own disciples to, *enter by the NARROW GATE; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.* (Matt 7:13-14) It is truly like trying to pass through the eye of a needle, yet, as Jesus points out, “with God all things are possible.” (Matt 19:26)

Here's a glimpse of **THE FACE** that's meant to stand before us at least a dozen times a day much like we stand before the mirror brushing our teeth after waking in the morning.

This comes to us from the 4th Servant Song through the Prophet Isaiah as he presents to mankind the **FACE OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT**:

His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the sons of men—
He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,

he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned everyone to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 52:14, 53: 2-6)

The **TRUE face of Jesus** as described here reveals to us a number of **ESSENTIAL THINGS**. First and foremost it brings us FACE TO FACE WITH **THE TRUTH**. Jesus said to Thomas and all those standing around him on that day, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life...*” (John 14:6) as such, the glorious reality of the Divine Being, our Maker, is found hidden within the shell of a mortal man who shows himself to mankind **IN THE MARRED and DISFIGURED COUNTENANCE WE SEE BEFORE US**.

A huge part as to why this is the way it is lies in having to first of all **acknowledge the consequences of sin at work among creation**. We see how his MARRED APPEARANCE is “*beyond human semblance*.” Sin makes us less than human, less than who we were created to be. In creation humanity was created fully in the image and likeness of God, but with sin **THE DIVINE IMAGE WAS DISFIGURED**. As the Church Fathers would say, “*it became almost unrecognizable*.”

And so it stands: to encounter THE FACE OF CHRIST in this particular dimension is to encounter ourselves without grace... For what is being revealed to us in the crucified King on the cross is what we look like, all of us, what the whole lock stock and barrel of human beings look like if and when we choose to live lives without accessing **THE GRACE that’s made available to us THROUGH FAITH!!!**

Everybody starts here... right at the foot of the cross staring at our **BROKEN HUMANITY** – only when we meet Christ on the cross do we meet ourselves experiencing the fullness of God's Justice – a JUSTICE that has been channeled into GLORY through Christ’s Resurrection and the invitation now being extended to all of mankind: Christ’s life death and resurrection invites us to a DEEPER KNOWLEDGE concerning who we are as creatures having been made in the Image and Likeness of God, creatures wounded by Sin, and now living lives of Faith as creatures that have been **REDEEMED BY THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB**.

This is where we turn the corner – and by that I mean – I’m now taking into consideration the fact that **we are a people of faith, a people of prayer, people that have been profoundly impacted by the face of Christ at work in our lives** and as such, we find ourselves staring at a new way of being in the world. Wondering and pondering how to best live out this NEW REALITY that we’ve become.

We can only truly **COME TO OURSELVES**, truly **FIND OURSELVES**, by emulating Christ’s Self-Sacrificial Love.

We read in *Gaudium et Spes*:

“The Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, “that all may be one. . . as we are one” (John 17:21-22) at that moment, He opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the Divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth, which God willed for itself, CANNOT FULLY FIND HIMSELF **EXCEPT THROUGH A SINCERE GIFT OF HIMSELF**. (GS 24)

We learn to live in the new dignity that has been entrusted to our care, that of a life refashioned and reborn through the gift of faith, by way of serving others in this world and we do so motivated primarily by serving He who loved us to the end – and serving Him means to ENCOUNTER IN THE FACE OF JESUS an

unfathomable love that **URGES US TO RESPOND**: to embrace such love within ourselves and to share it with others.

Thus we come to the SUMMARY OF THE LAW: *‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.[and], ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’* (Matt 12:29-31)

Our GAZING AND MEDITATING UPON THE FACE OF JESUS, the very icon of God’s love, even in private devotion causes us to reflect upon the call to communion with all others who are seeking God’s face. In the words of Pope Benedict:

“Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. **I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own.** Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become “ONE BODY”, completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbour are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself. (DCE 14)

As we come face to face with the love that God has for us, we are all called to express that same love to those around us, and particularly to those who find themselves on the margins: the poor, the sick and those ravaged by sin (both their own and that of others). It is precisely **IN THESE FACES THAT WE ARE CALLED TO SEE THE FACE OF CHRIST**, the face of the *Suffering Servant* – to see the love that God has for us in the suffering he himself bore for our sakes, and to respond to the call that this type of love elicits within us.

As St. John points out: *“Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”* (1 John 4:20) This call **TO LOVE**, to see the face of Christ, extends particularly to those we ourselves find most difficult to deal with.

As Jesus told his followers, **“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.”** (Luke 6:32-33)

This is where THE THEME for this conference finally starts gaining some traction. *“Serve to learn in order to learn to serve...”*

ST. VINCENT DE PAUL once wrote: *“I shouldn’t judge poor peasants, men or women, by their surface appearance, nor by their apparent mental capacities. And this is hard to do, since very frequently they scarcely seem to have the semblance or the intelligence of reasonable beings, so gross and so offensive are they. But, turn the coin, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, Whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us by just these people.”* (XI Conference #19, p.32)

MOTHER TERESA expanded upon this notion of MEETING THE SUFFERING FACE OF CHRIST by way of applying it to every relationship we have with another. She wrote *“Seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, all the time, and HIS HAND IN EVERY HAPPENING; this is what it means to be contemplative in the heart of the world. Seeing and adoring the presence of Jesus, especially in the lowly appearance of bread, and in the distressing disguise of the poor.”* (In the Heart of the World)

While many of the Saints have gone before us continue to have much to teach us in the way of seeing Christ in the poor, let’s not forget to acknowledge where the first acquired their IMPETUS FOR CHARITY. The Scriptures themselves – that is **The Word of God made flesh and the Word of God penned down by means of Inspired Authors** are crystal clear when it comes to getting across to believers that to LIVE A LIFE OF FAITH IN CHRIST MEANS to live a life reaching out to all people that surround us, and in a privileged way: **the poor, the marginalized, those on the fringes of society.**

One of the New Testament authors that comes across particularly strong in this respect is letter that comes to us from James. While it's a rather short letter – 3 pages in length – loaded with practical advice geared towards motivating Christian communities that find themselves struggling with what it means to concretely live a Christian life. When you read the words of James, **a ringside seat to that which was warring within the heart of a particular community**. And the reason for THIS WAR was the divisions and factions being caused between those who have and those who have not...

The ***RICH*** versus the poor... It's a theme that has been around ever since the beginning of the Church and one which we continue to seek the balance for in all of our communities. James goes right to the Heart of the Matter by way of addressing the wealthy in these words: "**You've lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure – YOU HAVE FATTENED YOUR HEARTS IN A DAY OF SLAUGHTER... You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you!**"

If there's one thing that experience has taught me, it's that addressing people in this way WILL MOST CERTAINLY GET YOU SOME KIND OF REACTION. And while *it's probably not going to be a pat on the back or an 'ATTA BOY'*, the Holy Spirit uses these words to find a crack within the consciences of those for whom they are addressed and works on them within the silence of their thoughts. Actually, in some shape or form, **IF WE ALLOW for it to happen**, the words spoken by James this day have the opportunity to work on each of us, myself included, a great reminder that we are to **BE DOERS OF THE WORD** and NOT JUST HEARERS ONLY...

As Blessed Frédéric Ozanam reminds us: "***Knowledge of the poor and needy is not gained by pouring over books or in discussions with politicians, but by visiting the slums where they live, sitting by the bedside of the dying, feeling the cold they feel and learning from their lips the causes of their woes.***"

Another champion for those who had less than others when it came to material wealth was St. John Chrysostom. He lived back during the 4th Century of the Church and like James, he **had a strong dedication to preaching on poverty and wealth**. As a matter of fact, it was his preaching on riches and wealth that eventually led to his exile and ultimately his death.

Throughout his sermons, he spoke at least forty times directly on **ALMSGIVING** alone, **thirteen times on poverty**, and at least twenty times against wrongly acquired and **WRONGLY USED WEALTH**; not to mention the fact that OVER ONE HUNDRED SERMONS were geared towards **social themes involving poverty and wealth**.

St. John used an image derived from **the theatre to illustrate the foolishness of desiring riches and glory**. He claimed that poverty and wealth are simply **MASKS PEOPLE WEAR IN THE THEATRE OF THE WORLD**. He emphasized that while putting on a show the Rich Man only seems or appears to be rich but in actuality **he's not**:

"He often turns out to be the poorest of all... If you take off his mask, ***open up his conscience***, and enter into his mind, you will often find there a great poverty of virtue: you will find that he belongs to the lowest class of all. ***When death arrives and the "theater" is dissolved, everyone puts off the masks of wealth or poverty and departs to the other world.***"

To establish balance between the disparity of wealth and poverty which has been part of the fabric which makes up the mystical body of Christ on earth, the Early Fathers of the Church were champions at reminding Christians that there is to be **a balance of relationship between the Wealthy and the Poor**.

Those who have in **SUPERABUNDANCE**, are to assist in whatever ways they can those who have not. While at the same time, those who may be poor materially, **ARE RICH WHEN IT COMES TO SPIRITUAL**

MATTERS. Therefore, **they are to assist the wealthy by means of prayers and sacrifices for them** so that their spiritual poverty might be addressed before the Lord who calls everyone to love.

St. Vincent understood this fact very well. He knew that there are different ways to be rich coupled with different types of poverties at work in the world – perhaps this KNOWLEDGE is what inspired him to once say to his followers: *"Never forget, my children, that "the poor are our Masters". That is why we should love them and serve them, with much respect, and do what they ask of us..."*

Our blessed Lord said:

"Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also – Unless a grain of wheat dies, it remains alone; only in dying does it bear much fruit. Only those who hate their life in this world will obtain everlasting life..."

The call to discipleship is THE GIVING UP OF ONE'S LIFE for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake and continued work of Jesus Christ came to serve and not to be served. This is why, after using these images of death, Jesus then says, **"if any one serves me, he must follow me..."**

We find that St. Paul picks up on this image frequently; in Romans he says: *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.... The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.* (Rom. 6:5, 10-11)

And again in Colossians he writes: *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.* (Col. 3:2-3)

This is PARTICULARLY TRUE for those of you who have offered yourselves, **in response to God's call to serve as SVDP members**. Every time you drive over to St. Peter's to fill up a hamper in order to deliver the basics of life sustenance to our brothers and sisters in need, you are giving up your time, YOUR LIFE in service to Christ and his bride the Church.

To use the words of Jesus, **"we lay down our lives for the sake of our friends, for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and for the sake of the world."** This dying to self, which is a constant and perpetual calling, it is THE CONDITION, indeed the very definition of following Jesus.

I leave you with what I find to be a rather **POIGNANT ILLUSTRATION** that at one the same time reveals the importance of **KEEPING THE FACE OF CHRIST** continually at bay during the course of our everyday existence before the eyes of our hearts so that we can be inspired to follow **The Master** through the way that we choose to live out the precious few hours of our mortal life on earth.

This image comes to us from **Pope Benedict XVI** when he commented on **Gregory of Nyssa's discussion of Moses only being granted the ability to see God's back** – in the few words I will share with you, he highlights that our encounter with God, our seeing Jesus, is done in large part **THROUGH OUR DISCIPLESHIP**. For Discipleship, which can be understood as a **constant and perpetual seeking of the Face of Christ**, is **DIRECTLY** bound up with our coming to know Christ and all He promises

He writes:

*"Being able to see God only from the back—what else does that mean [Gregory says] but that we can only encounter God **by walking after Jesus**; that the only way we can see HIM is by following Jesus!! Which means walking behind him. The way that God is seen in this world is by following Christ; seeing is going, is being on the way for our whole life toward the living God. Jesus Christ, by the entire way that he walked, **especially by the Paschal Mystery of his suffering, death, Resurrection and Ascension, PRESENTS US WITH THE ITINERARY**."*

SEEK the FACE of God – and LIVE!