**Keynote address – Friday, Sept. 13, 2013**

**SSVP National Assembly – Madison, Wisconsin**

**Systemic Change and our Vincentian Call to Holiness Today**

On the 23rd day of April two hundred years ago, Frederic Ozanam was born. He lived to be just 40, but his life was rich, full and very varied. He was a faith-filled Catholic, a loving husband to Amélie his wife, a devoted father to Marie his daughter, a lawyer, an expert in the poet Dante, a much loved university professor, an extraordinary linguist, a prolific writer, a newspaper editor, a candidate for political office, and a faithful friend. We know him most of all as the principal founder of a lay Society that would grow like wildfire and would eventually spread the flame of practical love through the world. It is not length of years that counts. Shakespeare tells us in King Lear: “Ripeness is all” (V. ii 8-11). If fruit grows old and withers on a tree, it is worthless. But if it falls into our hands ripe and full, we taste its sweetness and it nourishes our life.

I have been asked to speak with you today about systemic change. Let me treat the topic in four steps: 1) the notion of systemic change; 2) some seeds of systemic change in Frederic Ozanam’s life and work; 3) systemic change and the home visit; 4) systemic change and God’s call to us as Vincentians to grow in holiness.

1. **THE NOTION OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE**

**The basic idea**

Today, those working among the poor speak more and more of the need for systemic change. In order to understand a systemic-change approach better, some analysis of the idea may be helpful.

Essentially, a system is a whole, a unified composite of things that work together. As a system’s parts interact, they affect each other constantly, either for better or for worse.

Today scientists focus continually on “systems”. Astronomers view the universe as a system. If a star explodes, everything else in the universe feels the effect. Doctors view   
the body as a system. If my blood is diseased, it affects everything else. Economists and sociologists view society as a system. If the economic and social elements that make up society function together positively, people thrive; if one or several of those elements are functioning badly, the whole system begins to break down.

So, basically, systemic change thinking affirms that “everything is connected to everything else.” Recognizing this, it becomes clear that, in order to change the situation of the poor, we must focus not only on one particular problem, like supplying them with food, important as that may be at times, but on the overall circumstances of their lives. Experience teaches that “quick fix” solutions, while temporarily helpful, prove inadequate in the long run.

**An illustration of how systemic change works**

Each of us lives within a socioeconomic system whose parts interact with each other. If the system is working well, it favors personal growth. If not, it thwarts growth and accelerates decline. If, for example, I don’t have a job, I don’t earn money. If I don’t earn money, I can’t buy food for my family. If my son doesn’t have sufficient food, he suffers malnutrition. If he suffers malnutrition, he can’t study well. If he can’t study well, he won’t graduate from school. If he doesn’t graduate from school, he may not get a job. If he doesn’t have a job, he doesn’t earn money. So the cycle begins again.

The challenge for a systems thinker is to know where and how to break the cycle. My experience on the international Commission for Promoting Systemic Change is that the point of intervention varies. Often, it is job creation. Often, it is education. Sometimes, it is micro-credit. In a striking project launched in San José de Ocoa in the Dominican Republic with the help of the USA Society of St. Vincent de Paul, clean and abundant water was the key. Clean water brought improved health. Irrigation brought crops that provided nourishment and also revenue. Revenue led to better homes and sanitation and enabled parents to send their children to school.

**Criteria of Systemic Change Projects**

As is evident from what I have said, not every project involves systemic change. Many good projects address urgent, immediate needs, but do not go beyond that. Different from these, a systemic change project has, among others, the following characteristics:

1. **Wide-ranging social impact on the life of the poor person**

This is the most basic characteristic of systemic change: that is, that the project helps change the overall life-situation of those who benefit from it.

**2. Sustainability**

The project helps create the social structures that are needed for a *permanent* change in the lives of the poor, like employment, education, housing, the availability of clean water and sufficient food, ongoing local leadership, etc.

**3. Replicability**

The project can be adapted to solve similar problems in other places. The philosophy or spirituality that grounds the project, the strategies it employs and the techniques that it uses can be applied in a variety of circumstances. Concretely, this is demonstrated when the project actually spreads beyond its initial context and is put into effect successfully in settings other than the place where it began. For, example, the project of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in San José de Ocoa has been replicated in 100 villages.

**4. Innovation**

The project brings about social change by transforming traditional practice. Such change is often achieved through the implementation of a pattern-changing idea. To use a phase often attributed to Albert Einstein, systemic-change thinking helps us “to learn to see the world anew”.

**An important distinction for our Vincentian Family**

Having looked at those systemic change projects, let me state an important, fundamental distinction. Immediate assistance to the poor and systemic change projects are:

* + not either/or options
  + but both/and imperatives

Sometimes immediate assistance to the poor is an urgent necessity that we cannot neglect. So, there are good works among the poor that are not systemic change projects. But still, it is imperative that we go beyond immediate necessities to long-range solutions.

**BREAK: Reflect and jot down your initial thoughts:**

1. **Is the notion of systemic change clear to you?**
2. **How would you define it in a sentence or two?**
3. **SEEDS OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN FREDERIC OZANAM**

The term “systemic change” is a modern one. It was unknown to Frederic Ozanam and his contemporaries. Like all of us today, Ozanam accepted as given, and sometimes as God-given, many of the structures that surrounded him. They were like the air he breathed. But Ozanam was born in a revolutionary era when numerous societal structures did begin to change. He welcomed many of those changes. He believed in democracy; in this, he was quite different from Fr. Etienne, the Superior General of our Vincentian priests and brothers at that time, who remained an ardent monarchist.

But though the term “systemic change” was unknown to Ozanam, within the context of his time he expressed many ideas related to systemic change. It is useful for us to examine these seminal thoughts, since they help us to situate a systemic change mentality in the spirituality of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul today. So, I offer you these five seeds of Systemic Change in the life and works of Frederic Ozanam. (Ray Sickinger, who is here today, has done something similar.) I will give each of the seeds a name, first using the terminology employed by Ozanam and then using the terminology found in systemic change projects today. One could also do this for Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Rosalie Rendu and other heroes in the Vincentian Family.

1. “The social question” and “the social teaching of the gospel” → Changing Social Structures

Ozanam’s writings are remarkable. Let me cite two statements which in their time were extraordinarily forward-looking.

In 1836, he wrote: “The problem which divides people today is not a political problem; it is a social one. It is a matter of knowing which will get the upper hand, the spirit of selfishness or the spirit of sacrifice; whether society will go for ever-increasing enjoyment and profit, or for everyone devoting themselves to the common good ... Many people have too much and still want more. Others do not have enough, or do not have anything at all, and they want to take by force what is not being given to them. A war between these two groups is threatening.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In an article he wrote in 1648, Ozanam made a statement which at that time was quite novel: “The gospel is a social doctrine.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He was one of the first people to use the phrase “the social teaching” of the gospel and of the Church. In fact, Pope John Paul II, at Ozanam’s beatification in 1997, referred to him a forerunner of the social teaching of the Catholic Church. Ozanam’s letters include many of the themes that 50 years later appeared in Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

Today the social teaching of the Catholic Church is remarkably developed. It invites all of us to see the relevance of the gospel in shedding light on social and economic questions, on political decisions that relate to the poor, on life issues, on war and peace and on many other social questions, including structures within society that keep the poor *poor*.

Today, we are conscious that sin is social too; it affects not just individuals; it also deeply affects social structures. It becomes embodied in unjust laws, power-based economic relationships, inequitable treaties, artificial boundaries, oppressive governments, and numerous other subtle obstacles to harmonious societal relationships. Some of these unjust societal structures keep the poor poor.

Luke’s parable of the Good Samaritan dramatizes the principle that love of God is displayed in love of neighbor. But today we recognize more and more that effective love involves not just binding up the individual victim’s wounds and pouring oil on them, but also making sure that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is safe for all in the future. Ozanam recognized this. He wrote: “Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveler who has been attacked. It is justice's role to prevent the attack.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Questions that concern the people → integral human promotion

Ozanam was not an economist, but he was very aware of economic realities. He focused often on the rights of workers: jobs, time for rest, a just wage (or what he called “a natural wage”[[4]](#footnote-4)), a pension for their later years. He wrote: “Behind the political revolution lies a social revolution. There are questions that concern the people and that they will fight for: questions of work, of rest, of salary. We cannot escape these problems.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

He stated: “Exploitation occurs when the master considers his workers not as a partner or even as an assistant, but as an instrument out of which he must extract as much service as possible at the smallest possible price. Yet the exploitation of one person by another person is slavery. The worker-machine is nothing more than part of capital like the slaves of the ancients. Service becomes servitude.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Ozanam was keenly aware of the various elements in the lives of the poor that affected their social well-being. He saw these as unavoidable questions, which, if not resolved, would lead to revolution. He identified a series of urgent questions: job opportunities, just salaries, rest, pensions, education, nourishment, health care, and spiritual care. He focused on the whole person and wanted to treat the person holistically.

1. L’Ère Nouvelle → advocacy

It is interesting to note that Ozanam was not just the founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. In 1848, he also founded a newspaper, called “The New Era”. It was meant to speak the truth impartially, without adherence to any particular political party, and to promote social justice for the poor and working class. Unfortunately, however, unlike the Conferences, the newspaper was short-lived, lasting only about a year.

It is clear that Ozanam, in founding the newspaper, realized how important advocacy was. He published articles addressing the critical issues that he believed were the cause of the revolutionary violence that ravaged France in 1848. Apart from the newspaper, he wrote numerous letters and articles in which he expressed his belief in the people, in a democratic society, and a more democratic Christianity.

Through his letters and especially through his newspaper, he urged political candidates to support the rights of workers. Among the issues he focused on were: jobs and wages, vacation and rest for workers, pensions for their retirement, the formation of unions, hygiene in the work-place, and education. He wrote 20 articles on social issues in 1848.

All those involved in systemic change projects today emphasize the importance of advocacy. Often the cry of the poor goes unheard, unless it is echoed by others who stand at their side. Besides announcing the good news of God’s love, the gospels call us to denounce the sinful structures that oppress the marginalized. Your Rule states that the Society will be “a voice for the voiceless” (7.5). It adds forcefully (7.6): “Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements.”

1. Seeing Christ in the Poor → Quality Service and Empowerment of Those We Serve

“The poor stand before us,” Ozanam wrote, “we can put our finger and our hands in the wounds, and the marks of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads… We should fall at their feet and say with the apostle: ‘You are my Lord and my God.’ You are our masters and we will be your servants… You are the sacred images of the God whom we do not see … and we will love him in your persons.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Ozanam wanted quality, competence, humility, gentleness and respect to characterize the service provided to the poor. Like Vincent de Paul, he insisted that not only should we do good, but that we should do it well, with adequate resources and at the same time with warmth and concern.

He emphasized that there is “help which humiliates and help which honors”.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Today, those engaged in systemic change projects are convinced that empowerment of those we serve is one of the crucial elements in guaranteeing the sustainability of those projects. They insist that the poor be engaged at all stages of a project: from the initial discernment of needs, to the planning and formulation of the project, to its evaluation, and to its revision in light of evaluation.

1. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul → Networking

Ozanam wrote eloquently: “Only one means of salvation remains to us, that is, that Christians, in the name of love, interpose between the two camps (of rich and poor), passing like beneficent deserters from one to the other ... communicating mutual charity to all, until this charity, paralyzing and stifling the egotism of both parties, and every day lessening their antipathies, shall bid the two camps arise and break down the barriers of prejudice, and cast aside their weapons of anger and march forth to meet each other, not to fight but to mingle together in one embrace, so that they may form but one fold under one pastor.”

Those involved in systemic change projects today all recognize the need to build a shared vision with diverse stakeholders: poor communities, interested individuals, donors, churches, the private sector, the public sector, governments, NGOs, foundations, unions, the media, international organizations and networks, etc. In an increasingly global world, networking and collaboration are crucial for the good of the poor in the future.

**BREAK: Reflect and jot down your initial thoughts:**

**What other seeds of systemic change do you see in the life and writings of Frederic Ozanam? Describe them.**

1. **SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND THE HOME VISIT**

The home visit has a very important role in the Vincentian Family. It goes back to St. Vincent himself. In 1617, when he founded the first Confraternities of Charity, he told them to go two by two to the homes of the poor. He wrote this into the Rule of each of the many confraternities that he set up throughout France. A typical Rule read this way: “The Ladies of the Company will take their turns, two by two, to serve the sick poor.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

He founded the Congregation of the Mission in 1625 and later wrote: “We … always go out two by two” to visit the homes of the poor during missions.[[10]](#footnote-10)

When he founded the Daughters of Charity in 1633, he told the sisters that their convent was to be the home of the sick. He placed huge emphasis on the home visit to the sick poor.[[11]](#footnote-11) It was one of the most striking characteristics of this new community of sisters.

Frederic Ozanam learned this Vincentian tool, the home visit, from Rosalie Rendu, who was renowned for it. Rosalie once said: ““I never pray so well as I do in the street.”

Today, can the home visit become an instrument for systemic change? You, who make so many visits, will have much more insight into this question than I. So, with a humility generated by my consciousness that you have much more experience in home visiting than I, let me simply suggest some questions for you to ponder:

* Does the Society’s work, visiting thousands and thousands of poor people, lead to an analysis of the root causes of poverty in the part of the USA where you live and the discernment of concrete steps toward dealing with those causes?
* What are the causes of joblessness learned from home visits? Lack of education? Lack of transportation to jobs? Lack of child-care?
* Do members doing visits come equipped with a “resource list” which might help those they visit come to know the agencies that might help them emerge from poverty?
* Are there follow-up visits to see if the initial visit was of any lasting help?
* Is there a way of establishing a mentoring relationship with the people visited, in order to help them emerge from poverty?
* The Society emphasizes “Charity and Justice”. It is very good at charity. How can it further concretize the justice aspect of its commitment to help the poor whom it visits?
* How can the Society’s commitment to justice be concretized locally? How can it be concretized nationally?

I am convinced that there are few groups in the United States that have as much concrete experience of visiting the poor as you have. The basic question that I pose to you today is this: how can your vast experience of hands-on home visits become an instrument for working toward systemic change? I recognize that what I’m describing may involve a change in the orientation of your home-visit procedures. That could initially be difficult. Some might find themselves resistant. Change is difficult for most of us. Lots of patience is needed. But I suggest to you that it's worth the effort.

1. **SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND THE CALL TO HOLINESS**

I could echo to you many voices calling you to engage in systemic change as part of your call to holiness as members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Today let me mention just three. They are all very relevant.

1. The Call of Ozanam

Ozanam was not just a gifted, prodigious worker. He radiated God’s love. His life calls all of us to holiness.

He wrote humbly to a friend: "Unfortunately, I say to God more with my mouth than with my heart: ‘I want whatever you want, I want it in whatever way you want, I want it whenever you want, I want it because you want it.”

When Amelie opened his will, she found this message:

*To my tender Amelie, to you who have been the joy and charm of my life, to you whose loving care has been a solace during all my ills over this past year, to you I address this farewell. It is brief as is everything on earth. I thank you. I bless you. I await you. Only in heaven will I be able to give you the love that you merit.*

Ozanam’s spirituality was distinctively *lay*. He loved God as a husband, a father, and a professor. But his love showed itself most of all, like the love of Vincent de Paul, in effective love for the poor. At Ozanam’s beatification, Pope John Paul II stated: “He understood that charity must lead to opposing injustice. Charity and justice go together. He had the courage to be engaged on the front lines socially and politically.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

I suggest to you that effective love for the poor today will involve our working toward systemic change. It will involve formulating projects that have wide-ranging impact on the life of poor people, projects that involve the poor themselves in leadership and execution, projects that are sustainable and assist the poor themselves to emerge from poverty.

1. The Call of your newly formulated Rule

Your Rule, like all the Rules that St. Vincent de Paul wrote, begins with a call to holiness. Right at the beginning (1.2), the Rule states the purpose of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in these words: “The vocation of the Society’s members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope.” But paragraph 7.1 spells this out very clearly in a contemporary context: “The Society gives immediate help but also seeks mid-term and long-term solutions. The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it. It is, therefore, committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination. In all its charitable actions there should be a search for justice; in its struggle for justice, the Society must keep in mind the demands of charity.”

Notice that the purpose of the Society is a deeply spiritual one: to follow Christ and to embody his compassionate, liberating love. This involves struggling to create a new heaven and a new earth, where justice, peace and love reign, where we try to identify the root causes of poverty and to eradicate them. On the bottom line, you and I are called to let Christ’s hope-filled love transform us and to let it transform the world we serve in.

1. The Call of Pope Francis

Recently in Brazil, Pope Francis, who has captured the hearts of so many people, said this at a huge gathering: “Don’t be afraid to take risks for Christ and the gospels. Take the risk of following him and serving him in the poor.” Earlier, he urged the people of Argentina “to work to change the structural causes and personal or corporate attitudes that give rise to poverty and, through dialogue reach agreements that allow us to transform this painful reality …”

Nothing will impact our spirituality as Vincentians more profoundly than meeting Christ in the poor person and loving Him effectively in that person. This practical love of Christ affects everything in our lives. It determines what we wake up for in the morning and what we do in the evening. It determines what breaks your heart and what fills you with joy and gratitude. So Pope Francis says to us today: Fall in love with the poor, remain in love with them throughout your life, and they will be your friends and intercessors before the Lord.

**BREAK: Reflect and jot down your initial thoughts:**

**How, concretely, do I resolve today to live out the Vincentian call to holiness? Individually? With others, in my local conference? With others, nationally?**

In conclusion, I want to say this to you today. Frederic Ozanam’s body lies in a tomb in Paris. His soul rests in heaven with God. But his spirit resides in you. You live and breathe that spirit. You are the Society of St. Vincent de Paul today. Walk into the homes of the poor gently and humbly, as you have always done, but be their advocate too before governments and civil society. Attend to their immediate needs as you have always done, but discern the causes of their poverty and work to bring about a change in the systems that keep the poor poor.

You are Frederic Ozanam and his companions today. They live in you and through you. I encourage you: breathe their spirit in deeply and live it out to the full.

1. Letter to Louis Janmot, Nov. 13, 1836. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. « Les origines du socialisme, » *L’Ére Nouvelle*, 1848, Mélanges I, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Tome 7, Paris, Lecoffe, 1872, p. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Notes for a course on Commercial Law, Lesson 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David L. Gregory, “Antoine Frederic Ozanam: Building a Good Society,” *Legal Studies Research Paper Series*, paper #10-0029, Oct. 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Letter to Alexandre Dufieux, March 6, 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Notes for a course on Commercial Law, Lesson 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Letter to Louis Janmot, Nov. 13, 1836. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *L’Ère Nouvelle*, Oct. 22, 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Regulations for the Charity of Women, Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, Paris, 1630. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Letter to St. Jane Frances de Chantal, written on July 14, 1639. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Common Rules, paragraph 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Homily of John Paul II, Notre-Dame de Paris, August 22, 1997, paragraph 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)