

From Your Servant Leader

November 19, 2015

College campuses have long been centers of righteous indignation. In one case, fortunately, it was also the birthplace of a worldwide movement of charity.

In recent weeks we have seen the rise of student protests against perceived racial and social injustices. There are new wrinkles to the protests and their promotion through student organization and social media, but they continue a centuries-old tradition of young people seeing a problem and then making their voices heard. We tend to think it started maybe with the Vietnam era or South African apartheid, but history shows us that groups of young people in the fishbowl environment of a college campus anywhere in the world have seemingly always been engaged in pointing out a society's worst aspects.



The irony is unmistakable. College students are fortunate young people who are lucky enough to have been born in a country or who have arrived there where education is valued and available, and they have the resources whether from family wealth or scholarships and loans to attend and succeed in life, yet they complain about the lack of fairness of it all. Twenty percent of families around the world don't have any adequate sanitation and probably complain about unfairness too, but no one hears them.

The story of our Blessed Frederic Ozanam, therefore, is even the more incredible when placed in the context of his environment. At our National Assembly last year in Atlanta, co-presenter Ralph Middlecamp reminded us that Frederic was in college when students in Paris were planning the type of revolts we picture in the "Les Miserables" book and play. They were also complaining most vociferously about the Catholic faith and its perceived uselessness in then modern-day France.

Frederic could have joined the young men waving banners and building barricades. Or he could have stayed in the bar to drink away his frustrations with his faith and his country. But instead he gathered some friends, found one mentor from the college and another from the neighborhood, and set out to do more than complain. He acted. And the world changed.

He had no way of knowing that he as a young man of only 20 years he was doing more than helping the poor in the blighted areas of Paris. I doubt he would have believed that even in his own short lifetime the group he helped found would not only get organized enough to write a Rule, but spread across France and across the world. In 150 countries and in nearly 900,000 Society members today, the righteous indignation of one college student still lives and more importantly, drives people to enhance their faith and help their neighbors in need.

The legend is that during the many spirited debates among Frederic and his classmates, one shouted at him something like, "What are you and your precious Catholics going to do about it?" We all get dared to prove our point, but Frederic took it many steps further. I don't believe that his subsequent

organization and acts of charity were undertaken to reply with overwhelming force to his classmate, but a little bit of, “Oh yeah, just watch us!” can go a long way!

We encourage speaking our minds here in the land of the free and the home of the brave. As we get older we may admire, or maybe just smile at, our young sons and daughters who can get so worked up about social issues. Let’s pray that some don’t spend all their youthful energies shouting for someone else – usually the government or the rich - to make it better or to change. We know that if only one student looks inward and asks “What can I do about this myself?” then great things can, and do, begin.

Maybe in this month of so much college protest, a new Frederic will emerge. Will we know him or her if we see them? And will we be prepared to mentor them into a new form of answering God’s call?

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Dave