

# Workshop: The Home Visit through the Eyes Frédéric Ozanam

## Raymond L. Sickinger

### Scenario # 1

Just before the first conference of Charity was formed, Frédéric and his friend, Gustav Tallandier, decide to bring wood to a person in need. They want to do something. However, when they arrive at the place, they panic; they drop the wood they were carrying at the top of the garret and then flee.

**What insights about the Home Visit do you find in this scenario?**

### Scenario # 2

A number of biographies document the true story of how the young Frédéric Ozanam visited a beleaguered Parisian woman with five children on one of the first home visits he made in the spring of 1833. She was in desperate need. When her husband drank to excess—which was often, he became terribly abusive to both her and her children. Nearly all of her own hard-earned wages were immediately wasted by him on drink; her children suffered from more than just hunger. She was at her wits end when Ozanam visited her. First he provided her with the necessary material assistance. Next he probed more deeply into the details of her situation. As a young law student he hoped to understand exactly what her legal options might be in order to advise her properly. Fortuitously he discovered in his legal research that she was never officially married, allowing her the freedom to leave this oppressive household. In fact, to assure her, he obtained an official decision from the Procureur du Roi stating this fact. When he first informed her, Ozanam suggested that she should leave the premises to live elsewhere in Paris with her children, but Ozanam soon realized how great the wrath of the foiled husband was once he learned of the potential loss of his drinking income. Concerned for the family's safety, Ozanam suggested a legal procedure to force the man to quit Paris. However, he listened carefully to the women's counsel. Based on her recommendation, he instead sought a legal order that would prevent the husband from leaving Paris. Now the women would be free to live with her mother in Brittany. A collection was taken up for her travel expenses. When she departed with her youngest children, the two eldest boys, eleven and twelve in age, were apprenticed with Monsieur Bailly's printing establishment and cared for at the Bailly house.

**Source:** Raymond L. Sickinger, "Frédéric Ozanam: Systemic Thinking, and Systemic Change," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*, 32: 1 (2014), Article 4. Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol32/iss1/4>

This story is documented in Kathleen O'Meara, *Frederic Ozanam, Professor at the Sorbonne, His Life and Works* (New York: The Catholic Publication Society Company, 1891), 64. The story is related by at least two others. It appears in Right Reverend Monsignor Louis Baunard, *Ozanam in His Correspondence* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society, 1925), 72. It is also related in Edward O'Connor, S.J., *The Secret of Frederick Ozanam: Founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, LTD., 1953), 32.

**What insights about the Home Visit do you find in this scenario?**

## Scenario # 3

According to Amélie, Frédéric was immensely forgiving; he believed that he did not have the right to judge others. She related this moving episode:

### **Amélie:**

He had aided an Italian for a long time by making him do translations for which he had no need. Believing himself to be sure of his integrity, he found him a position as a master of supervision and discipline. But shortly afterwards, he was dismissed under the most serious accusations. This man remained without resources, and one day, driven by misery, he came to ask for some aid. Frederic, indignant, reproached him for his infamous conduct and sent him away without giving anything to him. But he quickly repented for his harshness, saying that one should never push a man to despair, that one did not have the right to refuse a slice of bread, even to the vilest scoundrel, and that finally, he would need, one day, that God would not be as harsh to him as he had just been to this man. Not being able to hold himself back any longer, he took his hat and ran with all his might to the Luxembourg Garden where he caught up with this man and gave him what he needed.

Hess, *Cahiers Ozanam*, 117. For the original French text see Amélie Ozanam-Soulacroix, *Notes biographique sur Frédéric Ozanam*, Edition established by Raphaëlle Chevalier-Motariol, in Faculté de théologie Université catholique de Lyon, *Frédéric Ozanam: Actes du Colloque des 4 et 5 décembre 1998* (Paris: Bayard, 2001), 332-33.

**What insights about the Home Visit do you find in this scenario?**

## Scenario # 4

On New Year's day in 1852, Frédéric was saddened by the news that a couple whom he had served were forced to sell their chest of drawers. Amélie relates the story:

### **Amélie:**

It was the last of their former comforts . . . [The wife] . . . had had the chest of drawers since her marriage and . . . she no longer knew where to keep her scanty clothes and those of her children. My Fred told me that he wanted to give these poor people a joyous surprise in returning this chest of drawers to them as their New Year's gift. I advised him that the 25 francs that it would cost might be better used in giving little by little to them in order that the husband might rest because he was threatened with an attack on account of too much work. He said that this was true, and he went on his rounds of official visits. When he returned, he was very sad, scarcely looking at the toys which crowded the parlor and not wanting to touch the candies that his little daughter, Marie, offered to him. I inquired about the reason for his sadness; he said to me that he thought about the poor, that a slight part of the money that we had spent to amuse his daughter would have been enough to cause true happiness. And as I begged him to pursue his first

thought, he left immediately, taking a porter with him . . . to get this chest of drawers and to have it taken to those poor people; he then returned to the house very cheerful.

Hess, *Cahiers Ozanam*, 117-18. For the original French text see Amélie Ozanam-Soulacroix, *Notes biographique* in *Actes du Colloque*, 334-35.

**What insights about the Home Visit do you find in this scenario?**

## **Scenario # 5**

The 1835 Rule of the society emphasized:

“Our love of our neighbor, then, should be without respect of persons. . . . We are not to inquire whether they belong to any party, or sect, in particular. Jesus Christ came to redeem and save all men . . . We will not discriminate more than did He, between those whom suffering and misery have visited.”

Frédéric’s wife, Amélie, provides an excellent example of how her husband took to heart these admonitions:

### **Amélie:**

The last winter that Frédéric spent in Paris, he was already very ill and my prayers could not prevent him from going weekly to . . . a lost and very ungodly old man . . . . He remained sometimes three quarters of an hour to one hour on his feet, exposed to all the winds, in the middle of the cries of market routes to educate, to persuade this man who was extremely bad. He was an old Septembrist Jacobin, a terrorist who kept hating and blaspheming. With great love and patience Frédéric persisted for two years. His efforts and prayers finally worked. The old man was persuaded by Frédéric to forgive and to make his Easter communion which he did in very good feelings. When the old man died a bit later, he died well.

For the source of the original French text see Amélie Ozanam-Soulacroix, *Notes biographique* in *Actes du Colloque*, 334.

“Septembrist Jacobin”: The Jacobins were a radical political group during the French Revolution. Septembrist refers to the September Massacres of 1792 during the French Revolution. Mob violence broke out and the prisons were emptied with many prisoners massacred. Some 1200 prisoners, including many women and young children, lost their lives in that event.

**What insights about the Home Visit do you find in this scenario?**

## **Insights that can be gleaned from the scenarios**

### **Scenario # 1**

Going in pairs was helpful and was engaged in from the start  
Planning home visit is important  
Good intentions are not enough  
Being out of one's comfort zone can be troubling, but it is necessary  
Guidance from someone with experience is absolutely necessary

### **Scenario # 2**

Frédéric went beyond the immediate need  
Frédéric saw a way to advocate for the person  
Fredric had enough sense to listen to the advice of the person  
He learned that people in poverty are resourceful  
He was able to provide aid that brought the family to a position of self-sufficiency  
He used his legal talents to good advantage  
He saw jobs as a way out of poverty--apprenticeships  
He discovered how important it is to build trust and friendship  
He saw that poverty is complex  
He discovered that there is a need sometimes to make multiple visits to the same person  
Old stereotypes were broken down.

### **Scenario # 3**

Frédéric learned the importance of being non-judgmental  
He again saw the complexity of poverty  
This instance gives us a glimpse of the intimate friendships he formed with those in need—  
    acting as a mentor  
He demonstrates a willingness to reflect on his own motivations.  
He sees the importance of second chances and of not being excessively rigid.

He quickly remembered that it was God's work he was doing and not his own.

#### **Scenario # 4**

Frédéric saw the importance of compassion in helping others. Never businesslike. Relational and not transactional

He exhibited a desire to see others flourish

He was willing to sacrifice his own conveniences to help others

He had the ability to see those in poverty as human beings with the same kind of hopes and dreams as all of us.

He learned that no one chooses to live in poverty and that anyone can find their circumstances reversed in a moment

This scenario highlights the power of the home visit to transform us and not just those we visit.

#### **Scenario # 5**

Frédéric knew that poverty is complex. It can also be a lack of spiritual resources and not just material resources--care for the entire person

Frédéric knew that persistence pays off

He also knew that gentle, but firm, persuasion is better than punishment

He believed that no one is a truly lost cause

And that everyone has dignity and deserves our attention

The scenario also highlights the importance of faith as a support and strength both for the visitor and the visited

Final comments:

**“Let us introduce religion into our conversation when it comes up naturally. It is to be feared that an overzealous desire to convert people merely produces hypocrites.”  
(Ozanam, June 1848)**

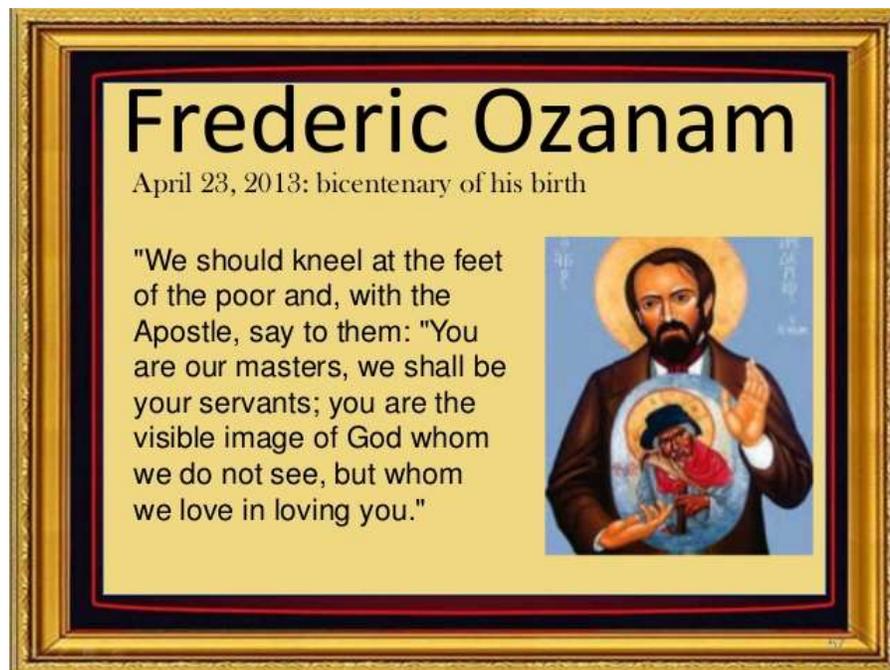
**"As far as possible we wish to know thoroughly those with whom we are dealing. If, when unacquainted with their outlook, we yielded to intemperate zeal, we should run the risk of**

never knowing what is going on in the family. They would conceal their true sentiments and show a feigned love of religion, hoping thereby to get greater assistance from us. Therefore, in our first visits, we speak only of the material wants of the family. If we do so with affability and marks of interest, they at length show themselves as they are, and we gradually become acquainted with their habits and opinions." (Francis Lallier Circular Letter August 1837)

- Both Lallier and Ozanam cautioned about being overzealous. In the last scenario Ozanam had built up a relationship and trust that enabled him to tackle such sensitive issues.
- It was Ozanam's encounters with those in poverty that convinced him that they not only needed to participate in political decisions that would impact their lives, but also that they had a right to participate.
- He gradually became a strong advocate for democracy because of his home visits. His frequent visits broke down social barriers and made him aware that those he visited were human beings who craved to be treated with dignity and respect. He recognized in them a dignity and goodness that was sometimes hidden by their rough exterior but which was more important and more valuable than anything external.
- Because of his visits, Frédéric came to understand and to embrace what Vincent de Paul had said about seeing Christ in those we serve. In Frederic's own words:

**Frederic Ozanam**  
April 23, 2013: bicentenary of his birth

"We should kneel at the feet of the poor and, with the Apostle, say to them: "You are our masters, we shall be your servants; you are the visible image of God whom we do not see, but whom we love in loving you."



## **Home Visit and The Rule**

### **Rule Part I**

#### **1. OUR PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH THE POOR**

##### **1.7 Prayer Before Personal Encounters or Visits**

Vincentians pray that the Holy Spirit may guide them during their visits and make them channels for the peace and joy of Christ.

##### **1.8 Reverence for the poor**

Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully, listening to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity, for we are all created in God's image. In the poor, they see the suffering Christ.

Members observe the utmost confidentiality in the provision of material and any other type of support.

##### **1.9 Empathy**

Vincentians endeavor to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve. Rather, they seek to understand them as they would a brother or sister.

##### **1.10 Promotion of self-sufficiency**

Vincentians endeavor to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and that of their local community.

##### **1.11 Concerns for deeper needs and spirituality**

Vincentians are sincerely concerned with the deeper needs and the spiritual well-being of those they help, always observing a profound respect for their conscience and the faith they believe in, listening and understanding with their hearts, beyond both words and appearances.

Vincentians serve in hope. They rejoice in discovering the spirit of prayer in the poor, for in the silence, the poor can perceive God's Plan for every person.

The acceptance of God's Plan leads each one to nurture the seeds of love, generosity, reconciliation and inner peace in themselves, their families and all those whose lives they touch. Vincentians are privileged to foster these signs of the presence of Risen Christ in the poor and among themselves.

### **1.12 Gratitude to those we visit**

Vincentians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit. They recognise that the fruit of their labors springs, not from themselves, but especially from God and from the poor they serve.

### **7.1 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.

### **7.2 A vision of the civilization of love**

Affirming the dignity of each human being as created in God's image, and Jesus' particular identification with those who are excluded by society, Vincentians envision a more just society in which the rights, responsibilities and development of all people are promoted.

As citizens of one world, Vincentians listen to the voice of the Church which demands their participation in creating a more equitable and compassionate social order, promoting the culture of life and the civilization of love. In this way, the Society shares the Church's mission to evangelise the world through visible witness, in both actions and words.

### **7.3 Vision of the future**

The Society's vision goes beyond the immediate future, looking towards sustainable development and protection of the environment for the benefit of future generations.

### **7.4 The practical Vincentian approach to social justice**

The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice.

### **7.5 A voice for the voiceless**

The Society helps the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves. When they cannot, the Society must speak on behalf of those who are ignored.

### **7.6 Facing the structures of sin**

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.

### **7.7 Striving to change attitudes**

Vincentians oppose discrimination of all kinds and work to change the attitudes of those who view the weak or those who are different with prejudice, fear or scorn, attitudes which gravely wound the dignity of others.

The Society strives, with charity, to foster new attitudes of respect and empathy for the weak, so that all are able to understand, recognise and defend the right of each person to be responsible for his or her own life. The Society promotes understanding, cooperation and mutual love among people of different cultures, religions, ethnic origins and social groups, and so contributes to the peace and unity of all peoples.

### **7.8 Political independence of the Society**

The Society does not identify with any political party and always adopts a non-violent approach. It is good that some members follow and fully participate in their political vocation in such a way that they bring Christian values to political matters. Those members who hold political offices will be asked, always with charity, not to hold any mission of representation in the Society during their term of political office.

### **7.9 Working with communities**

The Society should work not only with individuals in need but also with families and communities. It can help an excluded or deprived local community to develop a sense of

responsibility and solidarity which leads it to improve its economic, social or environmental well-being, always retaining the personal contact of members with those who suffer.

### **Rule Part III**

#### **Statute 8: Visits to the Poor are made in a Vincentian Spirit (see the Rule 1.7 to 1.12)**

Visits to those in need should be made in their environment. This contact with friends in need should always be made in a spirit of friendship, respect, cordiality, empathy and affection. It should also promote self-sufficiency whenever possible for those who suffer and show concern for their deepest needs.

Services are provided regardless of race, creed, color, gender, sexual orientation, criminal justice status, disability, marital status, veteran status, national origin, age or physical handicap.

Home visits always are made in pairs.

#### **Other Quotations from Frédéric:**

Help is humiliating when it appeals to men from below, taking heed of their material wants only, paying no attention but to those of the flesh, to the cry of hunger and cold, to what excites pity, to what one succors even in the beasts. It humiliates when there is no reciprocity . . . But it honors when it appeals to him from above, when it occupies itself with his soul, his religious, moral, and political education, with all that emancipates him from his passions and from a portion of his wants, with those things that make him free, and may make him great. Help honors when to the bread that nourishes it adds the visit that consoles . . .; when it treats the poor man with respect, not only as an equal but as a superior, since he is suffering what perhaps we are incapable of suffering; since he is the messenger of God to us, sent to prove our justice and charity, and to save us by our works. Help then becomes honorable because it may become mutual. . .<sup>1</sup>

Cast your eyes on the world around us . . . The earth has grown cold. It is for us Catholics to revive the vital beat to restore it, it is for us to begin over again the great work of **regeneration** [my bold], if necessary to bring back the era of martyrs. For to be a martyr is possible for every Christian, to be a martyr is to give his life for God and his brothers, to give his life in sacrifice, whether the sacrifice be consumed in an instant like a holocaust, or be accomplished slowly and smoke night and day like perfume on the altar. To be a martyr is to give back to heaven all that one has received: his money, his blood, his whole soul. The offering is in our hands; we can make this sacrifice. It is up to us to choose to which altars it pleases us to bring it, to what divinity we will consecrate

our youth and the time following, in what temple we will assemble: at the foot of the idol of egoism, or in the sanctuary of God and humanity.<sup>2</sup>

“But the strongest tie, the principle of true friendship, is charity, and charity could not exist in the hearts of many without sweetening itself from the outside. It is a fire that dies without being fed, and good works are the food of charity. . . . and if we assemble under the roof of the poor, it is at least equally for them as for ourselves, so as to become progressively better friends.”<sup>3</sup>

The knowledge of social well-being and reform is to be learned, not from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor’s man garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind. When the conditions of the poor have been examined, in school, at work, in hospital, in the city, in the country, . . . it is then and then only, that we know the elements of that formidable problem, that we begin to grasp it and may hope to solve it.<sup>4</sup>

“We must . . . restore the doctrine of progress by Christianity as a comfort in these troubled days . . .”<sup>5</sup>

“In saying: let’s go to the people, I ask that instead of embracing the interests of an egotistical bourgeoisie, we take care of the people who have too many needs and not enough rights and who justly demand a more complete role in public affairs, guarantees for work and against misery.”<sup>6</sup>

It is “time to demonstrate that the proletarian cause can be pleaded, the uplifting of the suffering poor be engaged in, and the abolition of pauperism pursued . . .”<sup>7</sup>

The prospectus for *L'Ère Nouvelle* (March 1, 1848) was signed by Ozanam: This newspaper purported to “reconcile religion and the democratic Republic, to demand from the Republic liberty of education, liberty of association, amelioration of the condition of the working men . . .” It also called for the protection of “all peoples who have lost their nationality by unjust conquests which time cannot rectify, and those other peoples which, following our example from afar, aspire to achieve their own political and moral emancipation.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> O'Meara, 176-177. Original French text can be found in Antoine Frédéric Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Simon Raçon et Compagnie, 1872), t.1, v.7, 292-293.

<sup>2</sup> "Letter to Léonce Curnier," 23 February 1835, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 64.

<sup>3</sup> "Letter to Léonce Curnier," 4 November 1834, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 55.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Right Reverend Monsignor Louis Baunard, *Ozanam in His Correspondence* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society, 1925), 279.

<sup>5</sup> A. Frédéric Ozanam, *History of Civilization in the Fifth Century*, trans. by Ashley C. Glynn, 2 vol. (London: W<sup>M</sup> H. Allen & CO., 1868), v.1, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Mary Ann Garvie Hess, trans., *Cahiers Ozanam* Nos. 37/38/39, January to June (Paris: Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Council General, 1974), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Baunard, *Ozanam*, 278. The original French text can be found in Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.1, v.7, 212.

<sup>8</sup> Parker Thomas Moon, *The Labor Problem and the Social Catholic Movement in France* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), 35. The first quote is from Moon; the latter is a quote from the prospectus itself.

Link:

<http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Programs/Vincentian-Formation>