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Raymond L. Sickinger, *Antoine Frédéric Ozanam*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 385 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-268-10142-8

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Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853) was a famous French professor of comparative literature at the Sorbonne, a Dante specialist, and one of the founders of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. He is a familiar figure, but his reputation in both Catholic and academic circles has increased since his beatification by Pope John Paul II in 1997, and with the bicentenary of his birth in 2013.

Raymond L. Sickinger's aim is to produce a biography of Ozanam for English speaking audiences. Indeed, the English-language research on Ozanam is out-dated, while the French historiography has made great progress. Particularly noteworthy is the work of Étienne Diebold, Marcel Vincent, Didier Ozanam, Bernard Barbiche, Christine Franconnet and the monumental biography by Gérard Cholvy.[1] In English, a recent book by Carol E. Harrison includes a chapter on Frédéric and Amélie Ozanam.[2] While Sickinger makes extensive use of Ozanam's letters (a vital collection published in six volumes between 1961 and 2013) the special issue of *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* appears not to have been consulted.[3]

With this study, Sickinger has succeeded in closing the gap between the English and the French scholarship on Ozanam. Part one of the book provides a historical perspective on Ozanam's short but full forty-year life: his birth in Milan where his father participated in Napoleon's Italian Campaign; his youth in Lyon, his mother's birthplace and where his father became a doctor; his student years at the Collège royal where he was largely influenced by the philosopher-priest Abbé Noïrot in a time of polemics with the Saint-Simonians; his study of law and literature at the University of Paris; the foundation of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul by the students of the Latin Quarter; his eventual marriage after a long bachelorhood; his happy and loving family life; and his social and political commitment during the revolution of 1848.

We might contest some of Sickinger's assertions, however: Ozanam's father only returned to his religion at the end of his life, in a pattern typical of many men at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Even though they were not hostile to a certain influence of the Catholic Church in society, many men in this period refused to take Communion and rejected Confession, and particularly its dimension of sexual morality. Therefore, Ozanam was brought up in a common family situation with a disbelieving father and a devout mother. Sickinger might also have engaged more with Ozanam's spirituality itself: did it reflect the famous transition from a

fearsome God to a God of love? What about his roman devotion to the Pope? I would also have liked to hear more about Ozanam's strong devotion to the Virgin Mary.

As I have argued elsewhere, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul was founded more for spiritual reasons than social ones.[4] Ozanam and his friends wanted to answer to the Saint-Simonians, who proclaimed the death of Catholicism. To prove the contrary, the Catholic students showed their faith through their deeds and committed themselves to the poor, following a tradition of poor relief since the 1820s. Charity was less an aim in itself, than it was in service of an apologetic purpose. Of course, personal encounters with the poor later changed these students' lives, but their apologetic motivations explain why, for example, Sister Rosalie Rendu—the famous Daughter of Charity in the quartier Mouffetard—did not, in fact, play the role we have ascribed to her, a role historical sources cannot really support.

The chapters dedicated to Ozanam's intellectual life would need, beyond the presentation of his books, to bring out more of his vision. Cholvy has argued that this vision aligned with the broader apologetics of this romantic generation, influenced by Chateaubriand and his *Génie du christianisme* (1802). But Ozanam was also a scholar who used new scientific methods based on historical criticism of primary sources. Looking at his travels reveals this clearly.[5] Ozanam's papers, kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, are still waiting to be studied.

Part two of Sickinger's book is more thematic and examines Ozanam's "lessons and legacy" in seven chapters on friendship, spirituality and sanctification, solidarity, servant leadership, systemic thinking and systemic change, suffering, and his enduring legacy. Here, the biography takes up another aim: it intends to offer Ozanam as an example for the Catholic laity of the present. Indeed, his social thinking, his ideas and feelings about friendship or death have much to tell us, should we be Catholic or not. In a similar way, Charles Mercier has studied Ozanam's legacy for male communities of scholars who were divided, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between two loyalties: the university and the church.[6]

One might question Sickinger's intentionally anachronistic approach. He provides insights on current issues grounded in Ozanam's thought and reads Ozanam through the lens of present-days concerns. For instance, today French speakers more readily use the word "solidarity" than "charity," but around 1848 the two words were used interchangeably along with a third word, "philanthropy". There is thus a risk of making Ozanam say what he didn't. Similarly, I don't agree that friendships between the confreres of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul meant the same as the relationships they forged with the poor they helped. Compared to all of the letters he wrote to his friends, we do not know one from Ozanam to a recipient of his charity. Indeed, Ozanam's thinking was more egalitarian than most bourgeois Catholics of his time. But the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul sought to respond to the dissolution of society in the post-revolutionary period by restoring equal relationships between peers and hierarchical ones with the lower classes. Therefore, I think it more useful to confront Ozanam with his own time than with ours. Nevertheless, this alternative practice of history defended by Sickinger, while perhaps less scientific than organizational, is still equally legitimate: as Michel de Certeau wrote eloquently: "We reorganize the past in terms of the sense we want to give to the present." [7]

NOTES

[1] Gérard Cholvy, *Frédéric Ozanam. L'engagement d'un intellectuel catholique au dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

[2] Carol E. Harrison, *Romantic Catholics: France's Postrevolutionary Generation in Search of a Modern Faith* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[3] Séverine Blenner-Michel, Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée and Charles Mercier, eds., "Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853): Facettes d'un itinéraire" *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* 100 (2014).

[4] Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul au dix-neuvième siècle: un fleuron du catholicisme social* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2008).

[5] Bernard Barbiche and Christine Franconnet (eds), *Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853): un universitaire chrétien face à la modernité* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2006).

[6] Charles Mercier, in *RHEF*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-64.

[7] Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 55.

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