

Activity: The beginnings of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SSVP)

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam was born on April 23rd, 1813 in Milan, into a Catholic family that was not poor but not rich. His father was a doctor and his mother had inherited money. He was the fifth child in a family of fourteen children but only four children survived; the eldest daughter Elisa and three sons.

When he was young, Frédéric was very naughty. His mother often had to punish him for misbehaving. He would write letters to her complaining about his punishment. He went to school when he was nine and soon began to improve. He worked hard and was doing very well. Frédéric was very clever.

Blessed Frédéric, a devoted Catholic, went to study law in Paris. Whilst at university, Frédéric met a group of Catholic men who wanted to help the poor people in Paris.

Frédéric started a group called the 'Conference of Charity' with his friends.

The group consisted of:

Frédéric Ozanam, aged 19

Joseph Emmanuel Bailly, aged 42

Francoise Lallier, aged 20

Paul Lemanche, aged 23

Felix Clave, aged 22

Auguste Le Tallandier, aged 22

Jules Devaux, aged 22

The group changed their name to the Conference of St Vincent de Paul. They chose the name "The Society of St Vincent de Paul" because they were inspired by Saint Vincent, who had devoted himself to helping the poor people of France about 200 years earlier.

Instead of just talking about being a Catholic, the group were going out into the streets to help the poor and put their faith into action. The group agreed that the poor people in Paris

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were very poor and nobody cared for them and that these people needed help. Inspired and assisted by Sister Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity, the students visited poor people in their homes, bringing food and other necessities.

Sister Rosalie taught Frédéric and his friends to see the face of God in the poor people they visited. The Conference members recognised the importance of providing company and friendship as well giving them food and other items - those they visited were not just physically poor, but emotionally and spiritually poor as well.

As the student members of the Conference completed their studies in Paris, they started up Conferences in other areas of France. Within two years of the first Conference meeting, there were over 100 members of the Society. Soon, the Society spread beyond the borders of France, and there was a Conference in Rome, Italy, by 1842.

The SSVP started in Scotland in 1845 in St Patrick's Church, Cowgate, Edinburgh. This was only 12 years after the first Conference was founded in Paris. The mid 1800's in Scotland were the years of Irish immigrants and there was a need to help improve the lives of the poor. The first Conference in Scotland was set up in Edinburgh with their main task being to visit the homes of the poor and sick, Catholics and non-Catholics. Over the past 174 years, the Society has continued to grow in Scotland. There are currently 271 Conferences in 8 Dioceses. SSVP Youth works in Primary schools, Secondary schools and from Parishes. Your Mini Vinnie group is part of a community of 62 Mini Vinnie groups across Scotland.

Blessed Frédéric was committed to helping improve life for the poor. The aim of SSVP is to provide a place where members can practice Christianity by loving their neighbours. Frédéric worked so hard that he became ill and died on 8th September 1853 aged 40.

By the time of Frédéric's death in 1853, the Society was thriving in France and had spread throughout the world, fulfilling Frédéric's desire to "embrace the whole world in a network of charity". Today, the Society of St Vincent de Paul is present in 150 countries, with 50,000 Conferences and over 800,000 members.

