

The Particular Council of Ottawa, St. Vincent de Paul Society

BY

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The data contained in this paper were obtained in great part from Annual Reports and Minute Books of the Particular Council kindly placed at the disposal of the writer by the Secretary of the Council. The notes on the circumstances leading up to the formation of the St. Vincent de Paul Society itself were taken from a book entitled "Ozanam in His Correspondence" by Baurard, published by the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, and also from an old copy of the Rules of the Society published in Toronto in 1878.

Unfortunately, many intimate glimpses into the life of the Particular Council of Ottawa through the years have been lost through the destruction, about 1920, of much valuable correspondence. However, this has been compensated for in part by information obtained from two Vincentians whose membership in the Society stretches back over fifty years. I refer to Mr. E. L. Sanders and Mr. M. C. MacCormac.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is an organization of Catholic men founded in 1833 by Frederic Ozanam and a small group of fellow students at the University of Paris. Ozanam's background and training were totally unlike those of his great patron, St. Vincent de Paul. St. Vincent was essentially a practical man. Ozanam and companions, although, for the most part, law students, were primarily historians and philosophers. Now this does not mean that historians are impractical. It does mean that while St. Vincent de Paul saw poverty and suffering in the world and set out to do something to relieve it, Ozanam founded his Society to confound the critics of Christianity and to bring God's blessing upon him and his associates who had taken up the defence of Christianity against unbelievers. A brief account of the events leading up to the foundation of the first conference will give us an insight into the spirit of the Society wherever it exists.

In 1832 Emmanuel Joseph Bailly, editor of the *Tribune Catholique*, founded, with the co-operation of young Ozanam, a Conference of History and Philosophy. The Conference was in Ozanam's eyes the theatre of an "intellectual apostolate." Its sessions, unlike those of its predecessor, the Société des Bonnes Etudes, were not reserved to young Catholics of a particular shade of political thought. They were open to every mind desirous of instruction, to every shade and difference of contemporary thought. In one

of Ozanam's letters we read "The lists are open to every form of thought, even to the doctrines of St. Simon, and, politics alone excepted, there is full and complete liberty of debate."

The young men were very enthusiastic but they were also inexperienced. This inexperience, strangely enough, was indirectly, a factor in the establishment of the first conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Another factor was the apparent failure of the conference to achieve the ends which its founders had set for it.

The youth and inexperience of the members of the Conference engendered a distrust among the older champions of the Catholic cause, among whom was the Abbe Picot, editor of the *Friend of Religion*. This distrust flared into open opposition when Elie de Kertanguy, secretary to Lamennais, and a member of the Conference, came to the defence of Lamennais' work "Paroles d'un Croyant." It was in this work that Lamennais so violently attacked the monarchy and declared his rupture with the Church. Ozanam challenged de Kertanguy, but responsibility for what had been said was placed on the whole Conference and especially on Ozanam. The conference was falling into disfavour. To make matters worse it happened that at one of the sessions the champions of Christianity, taken unawares, were unable to successfully answer the arguments put forth against the Church. Something was wrong. Ozanam saw that something else was needed. Referring to the difficulties of those days he says: "When we Catholics, in our relations with unbelievers, deists, followers of Saint Simon, Fourierists, artificers in the remolding of society, when we sought to direct their attention to the benefits conferred by Christianity, we were met with the invariable answer. 'You are right when you speak of the past. In former times Christianity worked wonders; but what is it doing for humanity to-day? Even you, who pride yourself on your Catholicity, what are you doing to show the vitality and efficacy, to prove the truth of your faith?'"

This challenge, coupled with the disfavour caused by the de Kertanguy incident, called into serious question the wisdom of continuing the Conference of History. Ozanam insisted that it should carry on, but he added: "If our efforts have not succeeded, is it not because something is lacking to the supernatural efficacy of our speech? Yes, one thing is wanting that our apostolate may be blessed by God – works of charity. The blessing of the poor is the blessing of God."

Ozanam lost no time in gathering around him five of his conferees in the Conference of History: Auguste Le Taillandier, Paul Lamache, Felix Clavé, François Lallier, and Jules Devaux. With M. Bailly as its first president, the first conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was formed in May, 1833, at Bailly's rooms in the offices of the *Tribune Catholique*. It was called the Conference of Charity.

Following the inspiration of his chosen patron, St. Vincent de Paul,

Ozanam modelled the rule of the society upon the same principles that were in vogue in the seventeenth century. The rules were very simple and are still in force. The principal aim of the Society is the sanctification of its members through visiting the poor in their homes. It is forbidden to discuss politics or personal affairs at the meetings. The membership is divided into three classes: active, subscribing, and honorary. The conference is the unit of the society and is an integral part of the parish organization. It exists only with the approval of the pastor, who is spiritual director of the conference.

In the first copy of the rule, written in December, 1835, we read:

“Our little association bore at first the name of Conference of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. That name of Conference, which was its own even from the beginning, it has retained, so that the circumstances of its origin should not be forgotten. Some amongst us, whilst devoting ourselves to the defence of the dogmas of religion, in the then very stormy discussions of literary societies or Conferences thought that it was not enough to speak, that it was necessary also to act; hence came the works of charity to which they devoted themselves – hence the Conference of Charity.

Now that we have become numerous, it has become necessary to divide into sections. And since many wish to meet in other towns where they are obliged to live in the future, the name of Conference has been retained by each section, and all are united under the common denomination of Society of St. Vincent de Paul.”

The Society grew rapidly. The young students who were members of the conferences of Paris, when they finished their studies, returned to their native cities to establish conferences there. Within twenty years there were 500 conferences in France alone. Others had been formed in Italy, England, Spain, Belgium, the United States and Canada.

The birth of the Society in Canada is due to the charity and zeal of a young French Canadian doctor of Quebec City. In 1845 Dr. Joseph Painchaud went to Paris to pursue advanced studies in medicine. Shortly after arriving in Paris he met with the young Vincentians. Painchaud joined the conference of St. Severin in Paris while at the same time he carried on his scientific studies. C. J. Magnan in his “Historique de la Société de Saint Vincent de Paul au Canada” says of Painchaud: “While other young men studied in Paris the germs of death, Painchaud found there the true principle of Christian life.”

Painchaud returned to Lower Canada in 1846. He went to see the rector of the Cathedral of Quebec, l'Abbe Baillargeon, who later became Archbishop of Quebec. He explained to the Curé his desire to see the St. Vincent de Paul Society take root in Canada. The result of the interview was that on the 12th of November, 1846, at 7 o'clock in the evening, a small band of Catholic

men gathered in the chapel of St. Louis in the Cathedral to found the first conference of the society in Canada.

Perhaps a note on Painchaud would not be out of place here. He was no ordinary man. During the three years following the foundation of the first Conference he established eleven others and united them under a Particular Council. Painchaud was not strong physically. He was 27 when he returned from Paris and had suffered from a leg ailment. At the age of thirty he was cured, some say miraculously. In thanksgiving to Almighty God he decided to give his life to the missions of Vancouver. The ship on which he was making his way to the missions of the Pacific was wrecked on the coast of Mexico. Young Painchaud, unable to continue his journey to Vancouver, founded a hospital at Colima in Mexico. He died in 1855.

The Society came to Ottawa in 1860, seven years before Confederation, fourteen years after the founding of the first conference at Quebec, and ten years after the first conference was formed in Ontario at St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto.

The prime mover in the introduction of the Society into Ottawa was a very humble, but very charitable, man, well and favourably known to the citizens of that time by the familiar name of Jimmy Joyce. In a report to the Superior Council of Quebec, written in 1896 by John Gorman, president of the Particular Council, we read that Joyce "had long been active in deeds of charity, and in consequence realized the need of some organization to meet, in any adequate measure, the many calls for assistance. Learning of the existence of the Society in Quebec, and of the good work it was doing there, he determined to have a Conference in Ottawa. His first step was to get a number of prominent Catholics of the Cathedral parish to sign a document expressing their desire to form a Conference, and requesting the Rev. Father Molloy to call a meeting for the purpose. The meeting was called and a Conference organized."

The meeting was held on December 16, 1860, and the new Conference was given the name "Our Lady of Mercy." Joyce's humility seems to be illustrated by the fact that, although he was the prime mover of the organization, his name does not appear among the officers of the Conference. However, he left his mark on the Society, as even today the older members regard him as a sort of traditional figure.

The Conference operated in the Cathedral parish for two years prior to receiving its papers of aggregation on December 8, 1862. It should be explained that "aggregation" is the term used to signify the formal acceptance of a Conference into the Society by the Council General in Paris. Before such papers are granted the Council General must be satisfied that the members of the new conference are performing their duties according to the rule of the Society.

The Cathedral parish was bilingual in those days and in 1862 the

Conference of Notre Dame was organized to care for the poor of the growing French speaking element in the parish. This conference received aggregation on September 21, 1863.

In the sixties there was in Ottawa a parish of St. Andrew, the church being located on Sparks Street. This parish served the English-speaking people of the city who lived west of the Rideau Canal. The conference of St. Andrew was originated on July 6, 1862, and aggregated September 21, 1863. It is now known as St. Patrick's Conference, having changed its name when the titular of the church was changed from St. Andrew to St. Patrick.

All Catholics of what is known as Sandy Hill attended St. Joseph's Church in those days. To-day St. Joseph's serves the English-speaking Catholics of this section of the city. A conference was organized at St. Joseph's on October 12, 1862, and was aggregated on December 8, 1864.

On the 8th of February, 1863, the town of Pembroke received its first conference when St. Patrick's was organized. This conference received its papers of aggregation on July 4, 1864.

About this time it could be seen that the Society in and about Ottawa was growing rapidly. The feeling became general that a Particular Council should be established to unite the five conferences. A diversion from our running account might be permitted here to discuss the term "Particular Council." It has an interesting origin. At first sight one might suppose that the term "particular" would be applied to particular parish conferences. Instead we see it functioning as a general council in the city and uniting the parish conferences.

An understanding of the origin of the particular council will clarify this matter. We find this outlined in a circular letter written in 1837 by François Lallier, one of the founders of the Society and its first secretary general. As the conferences multiplied in Paris the direction of the Society was committed to a Council consisting of officers who did not belong to any of the conferences. After a short time it was thought advisable "in order to connect the Council with the Conferences, and the latter among themselves, to appoint also a Council Extraordinary, including, with the officers of the General Council, the Presidents of the different Conferences." This Extraordinary Council was convened whenever any resolutions were to be passed which were to be carried out in the conferences.

As long as the conferences were confined to Paris there was little distinction between the Ordinary and the Extraordinary Councils, but when new conferences were established in the provinces the separate functions of the two councils became more clearly defined. The Extraordinary Council became specifically the City Council and the Ordinary Council alone had to deal with matters of general interest. Hence it was decided that the Ordinary Council should be called the Council General, having charge of the general interests of the Society, and that the Extraordinary Council should be called the

Particular Council, having charge of the particular interests of the city in which it operated.

The Particular Council of Ottawa embraces the English Speaking conferences of the Archdiocese of Ottawa and the conferences of the diocese of Pembroke. Its officers consist of a president, a vice-president, a secretary and a treasurer, together with the presidents and vice-presidents of the various conferences, and the chairman and vice-chairman of the Special Works Committee.

With five conferences operating satisfactorily in 1865 permission was sought from the Superior Council in Quebec to organize a Particular Council. The authorization was received and in the month of May, 1865, the Particular Council of Ottawa was organized. In 1874 the new conference of St. Anne was added to its circumscription.

Until 1878 the French conferences were grouped with those of the English-speaking parishes, but in that year a second particular Council was formed to embrace the French conferences of the city, of which there were two – Notre Dame and St. Anne. The French Particular Council took the name of St. Louis.

The next Conference to be formed under the Particular Council was in a rural parish of Ottawa Diocese. St. Stephen's Conference, Old Chelsea, was aggregated in 1876. It is interesting to note that the annual report of the Particular Council for 1885 remarks that, because of the distance of Old Chelsea from Ottawa, the officers of the conference were unable to take an active part in the proceedings of the Particular Council. Old Chelsea is nine miles from Ottawa.

St. Mary's Parish in Almonte was the next to enroll under the banner of St. Vincent de Paul. The conference was aggregated on March 28, 1880.

Prior to the year 1890 the parish of St. Anne, like the Cathedral, was bilingual. In March, 1887, St. Bridget's Conference was formed to care for English-speaking families of St. Anne's parish. It was aggregated on February 27, 1888. The first president was John Casey. In 1890 a new parish was created, embracing the English-speaking people of both the Cathedral and St. Anne's. It was given the title of St. Bridget. As a result of this development the Conference of Our Lady of Mercy in the Cathedral parish and that of St. Bridget in St. Anne's combined to form the Conference of Our Lady and St. Bridget under the presidency of John Casey, president of St. Bridget's Conference.

Another conference formed in 1887 was, as the Annual Report for that year stated, "to a certain extent an experiment." The previous year Thomas Richardson, secretary of the Council, and John Gorman of Pembroke represented the Particular Council at the Fourth General Assembly of the Society in North America held at Washington. These men reported that at the General Assembly great stress was laid upon the advantages of establishing

Aspirant or Junior Conferences composed of young men to whom suitable works were confided and from whom in due course the ranks of the senior conferences were recruited. That staunch friend of the Society, Father Matthew Whelan of St. Patrick's, was much impressed and, at his request, the Particular Council instituted the Junior conference of St. Patrick on May 8, 1887. It was the first junior conference in Canada. The first president was E. L. Sanders, who is still a member of the Society and who was of great assistance in compiling these notes. An idea of the service rendered by Mr. Sanders to the Society may be gleaned from the Annual Reports. The report for 1907 records his retirement from the office of Secretary of the Particular Council after serving twenty years in that capacity. The year 1913 saw him again on the board of the Council, this time as Treasurer. He held this office for a quarter of a century until his retirement one year ago because of ill health.

One interesting task confided to the Junior Conference was "the preservation of order at the children's Mass." The children of those days apparently did not remain in school as long as they do to-day, for the report for 1887 points out that a duty of the Junior Conference was "the preparation of children who have left school for First Communion and Confirmation." It also had care of the free lending library of the parish.

The experiment of 1887 proved a successful one. The Junior Conference has prospered in good works since its establishment. For many years it has provided boots and shoes and school books to the children of poor families in the parish. It also supplies complete outfits for children receiving their First Communion and Confirmation.

The year 1887 seems to have been an eventful one in the life of the Council. This seems to have been due in great measure to its very active president, Thomas Richardson. Besides the founding of two new conferences two special works were inaugurated. These were the Protection of Immigrants and the Patronage of Schools. The purpose of the first of these was to befriend and lend a helping hand to newcomers from overseas, and the second made an attempt to increase attendance at Separate schools. The Junior Conference assisted greatly in this latter work.

Following the organization of St. Patrick's Junior Conference the number of conferences increased as the number of parishes in the city grew, until today, when there is a conference in every parish in the city except one.

With the passing years the financial burdens of the Conferences increased. The first printed annual report published in 1885 gives the expenditures of the conferences within the circumscription of the Council as \$1,271.17. Twenty-five years later this amount had increased to \$2,666.70, and last year the conferences spent \$11,855.53.

The Particular Council has inaugurated many interesting and worthwhile movements in Ottawa, if not by actually organizing them, at least by studying their possibilities and suggesting them. In 1862 the Conference of

Our Lady of Mercy opened a shelter for orphaned children and old people. This work after being carried on for three years was taken up and continued under a separate board of management. It proved to be the forerunner of that splendid institution which we now know as St. Patrick's Home.

The Ottawa branch of the Catholic Truth Society owes its establishment to the interest of the Council. At the suggestion of Father Whelan the Council in 1891 began the practice of having a paper on some suitable subject prepared by one of the members and read and discussed at its quarterly meetings. J. A. J. McKenna read a paper on the advisability of organizing in Ottawa a branch of the Catholic Truth Society. The Council strongly recommended that the step be taken and appointed a committee to make preliminary arrangements for establishing the branch. It was set up on November 8, 1891, with its president the Honorable Sir John Thompson, at that time Minister of Justice and later Prime Minister of Canada. The first secretary was a man well known to you all, Dr. W. L. Scott, now president of the branch.

There was a rural-urban problem back in the nineties as well as at the present time. In the annual report of 1895 we read that Father Cole of St. Mary's, speaking at the July quarterly meeting, referred to "the sad mistake so often made by country people leaving comparative comfort on their farms and flocking to the cities, where they too often reached a state of poverty. His advice to those living in the country was to remain there, as there was nothing to be gained either materially or spiritually by removing to the city."

Special works, such as visiting the hospital and the county jail were taken up at different times but not prosecuted regularly. To put this work on a more efficient plane a Special Works Committee was organized in 1908. This committee has proven a valuable adjunct of the Council through the years and has taken on such additional work as the care of a central wardrobe for the conferences and to a limited degree the provision of beds or transportation to stranded transients.

An effort of the Council in 1911 to establish a Rescue Home proved unsuccessful. Considerable work was done on the project but this was brought to naught by the inability of the Council to find a religious order who could undertake the work at that time.

During the last Great War the Society co-operated with the City Relief Committee in relieving distress consequent upon the beginning of hostilities in Europe. The annual report for 1915 shows that the various conferences were able to secure civic relief for many of their families. While this relieved the conferences of much of the financial burden during the war, the depression which followed it taxed their funds to the limit. The report for 1921 points out that "during the coming winter it is feared there will be exceptionally large demands on the funds of the conferences in consequence of the large number of unemployed men who even now are seeking relief"

One special work in which the members took great pride was the

provision of a portable altar for the patients of the Royal Ottawa Sanatorium in 1929. I can still recall how pleased was my late father, the president at that time, when he attended the first Mass celebrated in the Sanatorium.

The Society since 1936 has assisted in financing Friendship House, a Catholic Hostel for transient unemployed men. It has also undertaken to pack and ship canned goods donated by the Catholic people of Ottawa in the past few years for the drought-stricken areas of Western Canada.

Like most great socio-religious movements the St. Vincent de Paul Society has achieved success as long as its members have remained true to the spirit of its founder. This can be said in great part of the Conferences under the Particular Council of Ottawa. There have been exceptions, of course, and quite frequently the Annual Reports tell of members being dropped from the rolls because of their failure to attend meetings. The Rule of the Society has been wisely written so that it is flexible to meet the changing conditions of time and place. It is so constituted, however, that indulgences granted by the Holy See are not obtained without strict adherence to it. This serves two purposes. It places the emphasis on the spiritual nature of the Society and it is an incentive to the members to be active in the cause of charity. If a conference remains inactive for a considerable time, it loses its aggregation. Fortunately, inactivity has rarely been the lot of conferences within the circumscription of the Particular Council of Ottawa.

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