



History of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

The Beginnings of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

The "Conference of Charity," from which the Society of St. Vincent de Paul sprang, was founded in Paris in April, 1833 by a few young men and a Catholic newspaper editor. The principal founder was a man of twenty years of age, hailing from Lyons, named Frederic Ozanam.

In 1831, Frédéric registered in the School of Law at the Sorbonne, University of Paris. Frédéric collaborated with Mr. Emmanuel Bailly, editor of the Tribune Catholique, in reviving a student organization. They called their new association "The Conference of History." The group met on Saturdays to discuss various topics, except politics.

At one of their meetings, a student challenged Frédéric and the practicing Catholics. The challenger admitted the Catholic Church had done much good work in the past, but asked what good it was currently doing. Frédéric called for a meeting of five of his friends; they agreed to meet at Mr. Bailly's office. On April 23, 1833, Frédéric's twentieth birthday, they founded the "Conference of Charity" to assist the poor. The six students chose Emmanuel Bailly, a married layman, as their first president. Shortly thereafter, they changed their name to The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in honor of their patron.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States

In 1845, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was established in St. Louis, Missouri at the Basilica of St. Louis, King of France, popularly called "The Old Cathedral."

Father John Timon, an American Vincentian priest from Pennsylvania, brought copies of the Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul back from Dublin, Ireland, to St. Louis. Timon talked to various people about the Society and its wonderful work with the poor. Bishop Peter Richard Kenrick, asked Father Ambrose Heim to establish the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and be its spiritual advisor. Father Heim was known by all for his extraordinary zeal and ministry with the poor. He became known as "The Priest of the Poor."

The first meeting of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States was held on November 20, 1845, only twelve years after its foundation in Paris. Nineteen of the most prominent Catholic laymen of St. Louis attended. The Conference was aggregated (formally recognized) by the Society's International Council in Paris on February 2, 1846.

Four Key Figures in the Society's Story

St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) was founder of the Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, Confraternities of Charity, and Ladies of Charity. A man of deep faith, keen intellect, and enormous creativity, he has become known as the "The Apostle of Charity" and "Father of the Poor." His contributions to the training of priests and organizing parish missions and other services for the poor shaped our Church's role in the modern world.

St. Louise de Marillac (1591 - 1660) a contemporary of St. Vincent, was inspired and directed by Vincent's spiritual leadership. She was Vincent's collaborator in founding the Daughters of Charity and organizing hospitals for the sick poor, asylums for the orphaned, workshops for the unemployed, championing literacy for the uneducated, and establishing standards for local charities. Louise was a wife, mother, teacher, nurse, social worker and religious foundress.

Blessed Rosalie Rendu, DC (1786 - 1856) was a Daughter of Charity who served for 54 years in the Mouffetard area, the most impoverished district of Paris. Emmanuel Bailly, the president of the Society, sent the founding members of the Society to Sister Rosalie for guidance and direction. Sending the founders on home visits, she formed them in the spirit of St. Vincent, teaching them how to serve the poor with respect and compassion.

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam (1813 - 1853) was founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Frédéric was a husband and father, professor and servant of the poor. He founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul as a young student with others of the Sorbonne in Paris. Frédéric's writings on social justice anticipated the first social encyclical of modern times.