



National Council of the United States, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Inc.



Manual

OF THE
SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Frédéric Ozanam encouraged the compilation of the first edition of the **Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul** in September 1845. This tradition has lived on, and now the **Manual for the United States** is offered to the members for their formation in the spirit and charism of St. Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frédéric. It is recommended for personal prayer as well as for reflection and sharing at Society meetings.

*This Manual is a companion document
to the Rule and Bylaws, and serves as the basis
for the Ozanam Orientation.*



Manual

OF THE
SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL
IN THE UNITED STATES

National Council of the United States, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Inc.



Table of Contents

Page

CHAPTER 1 VINCENTIAN HISTORY

1.1 The Vincentian Family	1
Origins	
Growth in 19th and 20th Century	
Vincentian Family Today	
1.2 Society of St. Vincent de Paul	3
Rapid Growth of the Society	
The Society in the United States	
Council of the United States	
1.3 Rule	10
Adherence to the Rule	
Revised and Approved in 1973	
Revised and Approved in 2003	
Bylaws	

CHAPTER 2 VINCENTIAN ORGANIZATION

2.1 Conference	15
Introduction	
Ministry of the Conference	
Procedure for Admitting Members	
Formation of Members	
Conference Meetings	
Home Visits	
Confidentiality	
Handling Confidential Information	
Services Offered by Conferences	
Funds of the Conference	
Conference Policies in Giving Material Relief	
Aggregation of Conferences	
Recruitment	
Termination of Membership	

Guidelines for Effective Conferences	
Legal and Financial Realities	
Tax Laws and Financial Records	
Reporting Procedures and Forms	
Record Retention	
Retention Schedule	
Conflict of Interest Policy	
Speaking for the Society	
Special Masses	

2.2 Councils 30

Introduction	
Council Functions	
Council Responsibilities	
Council Leadership	
Council Relationships	
Council Special Works	
Council Meetings	
General or Special Meetings	
Council/Board Meetings	
Council Funds and Accountability	
Acknowledging Charitable Contributions	
Society Employees	
Legal and Financial Realities	
Institution of District or (Arch)Diocesan Council	
Incorporation of Councils	
Tax Laws and Financial Records	
Record Retention	
Retention Schedule	
Conflict of Interest Policy	
Speaking for the Society	

2.3 National Council of the United States 39

Introduction	
Regional Structure	
National Council Strategic Plan	
National Council Services	
National Council Committee Structure	
National Database	
Conflict of Interest Policy	
Speaking for the Society	
Suspension, Annulment & Removal	

	<i>Page</i>
2.4 International Council	43
Introduction	
International Council and Twinning	
The Spirituality of Twinning	
The International Logo	
2.5 Spiritual Advisors	45
Introduction	
Functions of a Spiritual Advisor	
Appointment of a Conference Spiritual Advisor	
Appointment of a Council Spiritual Advisor	
The National Episcopal Spiritual Advisor	
 CHAPTER 3 VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY	
3.1 Fundamental Principles	47
Essential Elements	
Mission	
Identity Statement	
Vision	
Cultural Beliefs	
Virtues	
Call to Holiness	
Vincentian Ministry	
Vincentian Vocation	
Loyalty to the Church	
Primitive Spirit of the Society	
3.2 Vincentian Spirituality	53
Mystery of the Incarnation	
Jesus, Evangelizer and Servant	
Lay Spirituality	
3.3 Sacred Scripture	56
Preferential Option for the Poor	
The Good Samaritan	
Solidarity	
Charity and Justice	
You Will Not Be Judged	
Prayer	
Trust in Providence	
Sacrament of Marriage	

	<i>Page</i>
3.4 Devotion to Mary	64
St. Catherine Labouré	
Miraculous Medal	
Alphonse Ratisbonne	
3.5 Vincentian Prayers	68
Canonization Prayer	
Prayer for the Seriously Ill	
Act of Consecration to the Sacred Heart	
Opening Prayer	
Closing Prayer	

CHAPTER 4 VINCENTIAN SAINTS AND BLESSED

4.1 St. Vincent de Paul	71
4.2 St. Louise de Marillac	75
4.3 Blessed Frédéric Ozanam	79
4.4 Blessed Rosalie Rendu	83
4.5 Vincentian Saints, Blessed Venerable	86
St. Gianna B. Molla	
St. Richard Pampuri	
Bl. Francis Faa di Bruno	
Bl. Giuseppe Toniolo	
Bl. Pier G. Frassati	
Bl. Ceferino G. Malla Ven.	
Alberto C. Zuazo Ven. Jean-	
Leon Le Prevost Vincentian	
Martyrs in Spain Others	



CHAPTER 1

Vincentian History



1.1 THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

The Vincentian Family is a worldwide, living reality. Countless persons live and breathe the spirit, tradition, and spirituality of “the Apostle of Charity and Father of the Poor,” Saint Vincent de Paul. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is one branch of a colossal Vincentian Family Tree. The Vincentian Family consists of men and women, young and old, rich and poor, educated and unlettered, Eastern and Western. Family members speak common languages and obscure dialects; they live in large cities and on small islands; they are married and single, priests, deacons, and religious; they are CEOs and manual laborers. Who they are does not matter; what they have in common does: their call to follow in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul, their love for him, and their desire to keep his Mission alive.

Origins

St. Vincent founded three organizations, the first in 1617: the **Confraternities of Charity**, known in the United States as the Ladies of Charity. Under its current title as the International Association of Charities (AIC), it continues its mission of serving the poor.

In 1625 St. Vincent founded the **Congregation of the Mission**, usually referred to as the CMs or Vincentian priests, a community of priests and brothers whose special purpose was to evangelize the poor in rural areas and help in the formation and education of priests.

St. Louise de Marillac and St. Vincent de Paul co-founded the third organization, the **Daughters of Charity**, in 1633. Its primary purpose was to honor Christ by serving him corporally and spiritually in the persons of the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the young, and others in need.

These three groups have weathered periods of growth, decline, persecution, and renewal, but all three have survived and are very much alive!

Growth in the 19th and 20th Century

After St. Vincent, the Vincentian Family continued to grow, the Daughters of Charity becoming the largest community of religious women in the Church. In 1830, in the Chapel of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in Paris, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to Sister Catherine Labouré, a novice in the Community. From this apparition, the Miraculous Medal was struck and devotion to this sacramental quickly spread throughout the world. The Vincentian Family branch known today as the **Miraculous Medal Association** owes its origin to St. Catherine's vision.

In 1833, less than three years later, in walking distance of the Chapel of the Daughters of Charity, Frédéric Ozanam established the **Society of St. Vincent de Paul**. It also spread quickly. Blessed Frédéric saw the Society established in many countries, including the United States, Canada and Mexico. Members of the Society, Vincentians, went two by two to the homes of the poor to respond to their needs.

Fourteen years later, another request made by the Blessed Mother in her apparition to St. Catherine Labouré was fulfilled. "The Most Holy Virgin wants you to found an association of **Children of Mary**," Catherine told her spiritual director. This association came into existence in 1847 and rapidly spread.

Following the French Revolution, 103 different religious communities were founded in the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul, among them the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul, started by former members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the Chapel of St. Vincent in Paris.

Elizabeth Ann Seton founded the **Sisters of Charity** in 1809 at Emmitsburg, Maryland, patterning her Rule after that of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris. From Emmitsburg, several other communities of Sisters of Charity sprang up in North America and eventually formed a Federation.

In 1983, the **Vincentian Service Corps** began in New York City. This is a program designed for young adults to volunteer a year of service to the poor and marginalized, to learn and live Vincentian spirituality, and to live in community. The Daughters of Charity sponsor the VSC in St. Louis and in California. The Vincentian priests sponsor the Colorado Vincentian Volunteers in Denver and the Gateway Vincentian Volunteers in St. Louis.

MISEVI, a Vincentian Lay Missionaries program established in 1999, assists young lay women and men who want to spend several years of their lives in a foreign mission, offering them a pastoral and community setting, a financial stipend, and spiritual support.

The Vincentian Family Today

The amazing growth of the Vincentian Family is due to the attractiveness of the charisms of St. Vincent de Paul, St. Louise de Marillac, Bl. Frédéric Ozanam, and Bl. Rosalie Rendu, whose spirit and spirituality appeal to the human heart.

- The International Association of Charities (AIC) or Ladies of Charity consists of 260,000 members in 49 countries.
- The Congregation of the Mission has 4,000 members in 80 countries.
- The Daughters of Charity have 24,000 members in 87 countries.
- Vincentian Marian Youth groups number 240,000 members in 45 countries.
- The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has more than 800,000 members in 152 countries.
- The Sisters of Charity Federation counts 7,000 members.
- The Association of the Miraculous Medal boasts 5-10 million members in 15 countries.

Recognizing that there is strength in unity and numbers, the international leaders have challenged the Vincentian Family to collaborate more effectively to meet the escalating needs of the world's poor (**Rule: Part I, Article 4.3**). St. Vincent de Paul was a master of collaboration and organization. His vision of service entailed connections, relationships, and teamwork. "We should assist the poor in every way, and do it by ourselves and by enlisting the help of others," Vincent advised. "To do this is to preach the gospel by words and by works." Through collaboration, the Vincentian Family can, more quickly and more efficiently, fulfill Blessed Frédéric Ozanam's dream of embracing the world in a network of charity.

The international leadership urge the various branches of the Vincentian Family to use the excellent resources available to them to do spiritual formation in common. Each branch of the Family has much to offer the others in the field of spirituality, and each can benefit from the sharing of the collective wisdom and grace of the others. Eager to strengthen its relationship with the worldwide Vincentian Family, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States recommends the following websites to its members as excellent resources for formation and education: www.famvin.org, www.ozanet.org, and www.ssvpusa.org.

1.2 THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

*Our little Society of St. Vincent de Paul
has grown large enough
to be considered a providential fact. . . .*

– Blessed Frédéric Ozanam

On November 1, 1830, Antoine Frédéric Ozanam left his home in Lyon to enroll at the Sorbonne, the University of Paris, to pursue a law degree. Not long after his arrival in Paris, Ozanam became acquainted with Emmanuel Bailly, publisher of *La Tribune Catholique* newspaper. Bailly had founded a student organization called The Conference of History;

Ozanam joined the group. They met on Saturdays to discuss a wide range of subjects except politics. The conference attracted a variety of individuals with differing opinions and beliefs. One Saturday, during a heated verbal exchange, Jean Broët, a student and follower of the doctrine of socialism as espoused by the French thinker, Henri de Saint-Simon, challenged Ozanam and his friends: “We agree that at one time your Church was a great Church and was a great source of good. But what is your Church doing now? What is she doing for the poor? Show us your works and we will believe you.” Ozanam accepted the challenge. He and several of his friends agreed to meet and discuss what they might do.



On April 23, 1833, Frédéric Ozanam’s twentieth birthday, the six students (Auguste Le Taillandier, Paul Lamache, François Lallier, Jules Deveaux, Felix Clavé, and Frédéric) gathered in Bailly’s newspaper office (**Rule: Part I, Article 1.1**). Ozanam’s words moved all present: “We must do what is agreeable to God. Therefore, we must do what our Lord Jesus Christ did when preaching the gospel. Let us go to the poor!” And so, in the Providence of God, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was born.

The charter Vincentians then sought out Sr. Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, for her assistance and suggestions in ministering to God’s poor. Sr. Rosalie guided and mentored the founding members in the spirit and charism of St. Vincent, teaching them how to minister to the suffering poor with gentleness and kindness and to respect their God-given dignity.

The students selected Emmanuel Bailly as President, a position he would hold for eleven years. At first, they referred to themselves as The Conference of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul to parallel their Conference of History; the latter was their social and study group, the former their service group. In a short time, they changed their name to The Society of St. Vincent de Paul. They retained the term Conference to refer to the individual unit which was usually parish-based.



In a Conference, members of the Society gather together as brothers and sisters in the name of Jesus and in the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul, their patron. Ozanam and the others chose St. Vincent de Paul as their patron because his name was almost synonymous with charity. The Church has called him “The Apostle of Charity” and “Father of the Poor.” People outside and within the Society commonly refer to members of the Society as Vincentians, after its patron.

In God's Providence, the birth of the Society came at the right time in a country ravaged by revolution and civil disorder. The Society's purposes harmonized with the ideals of a large number of Catholic youth and older persons. Consequently, the Conference developed rapidly. By the end of the first year the Conference in Paris had grown to the point where it needed to divide into two groups.

The continuing growth of the Society in and outside of Paris necessitated a Rule. This was formulated in 1835. The General Principles were authored by President Emmanuel Bailly; the Articles of the Rule were prepared by François Lallier, one of Ozanam's closest friends and Secretary of the Conference from 1837-1839.

According to the original Rule and the Society's tradition, Vincentians celebrate "Festival Meetings," where Conferences and Councils gather for Mass and a meeting. Today, the National Council has designated six days for such meetings: Ozanam Sunday (the last Sunday of April, in honor of the April 23rd birthday of Ozanam), the Feast of Blessed Frédéric (September 9th), the Feast of St. Vincent de Paul (September 27th), the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8th), a Conference Mass at least once a year for all Members and their families, and another Feast Day of local custom (Rule: Part III, Statute 9). In addition, many Conferences commemorate the Feast of St. Louise de Marillac (May 9th) and the Feast Day of Bl. Rosalie Rendu (February 7th).

The Earliest Works of the Society

As the young men in the first Conferences began visiting the poor, forming long-term relationships with the families they had "adopted," they came to realize that they could offer much greater assistance than simply delivering food or firewood. In Paris, for example, the Conferences created a printing apprenticeship, housing, feeding, and training young men for a trade. In Lyon, the young Conference established a library and school for young soldiers, better preparing them for work both during and after their military service. The works varied according to the circumstances of the local Conferences, who were always encouraged to act both for charity and justice, seeking to transform not only the lives of the poor, but the society in which they lived. The Society continues this foundational tradition today through its many Special Works and Systemic Change programs.

Rapid Growth of the Society

Between 1833 and 1860 the Society mushroomed. Catholics of every age and class were eager to join the Society. After spreading throughout France, the Society reached Rome in 1842; England in 1844; Belgium, Scotland and the United States in 1845; Germany, Holland, Greece, Turkey and Mexico in 1846; Canada and Switzerland in 1847; and Austria and Spain in 1850.

Pope Gregory XVI approved the Society in 1845; both he and Blessed Pius IX enriched the Society with Indulgences. According to the Doctrine of Indulgences, issued by Pope Saint Paul VI on January 1, 1967, "An indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven as far as their guilt is concerned." Members may gain a plenary indulgence on the day of their admission to the Society, and when participating in a Festival

Meeting, provided they make their Confession, receive Communion, pray for the intentions of the Pope, and promise to observe faithfully the Rule of the Society. Conference presidents inform new members of the plenary indulgences they can obtain, and they fix the “formal” date of admission with this in mind.

Twenty-seven years after its foundation, the Society throughout the world was comprised of about 2,500 Conferences with a membership of 50,000. The Annual Report showed almost four million francs given out to the poor. The period from 1860 to 1870 was a critical one for the Society, especially in France. On the one hand, the parallel progress of luxury and materialism caused a hardening of the heart in many individuals. On the other, the public authorities—in particular the French Empire, and later the Spanish Republic—took measures against the Society, whose members they wrongly accused as dissenters. With the dissolution by force of law of the Council General in Paris, many French Conferences disappeared. Nevertheless, growth continued elsewhere, chiefly in North and South America.

After 1870, the Council General resumed its activity and devoted itself to repairing the losses in France and to renewing the links with other countries. The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Society was solemnly celebrated in 1883.

In spite of the breaking off of diplomatic relations between France and the Vatican, and on the brink of World War I, Pope St. Pius X arranged to be represented in Paris by a Papal Legate, Cardinal Vincent Vannutelli, on the occasion of the centenary of Frédéric Ozanam’s birth. In the Annual Report of that year, 1913, the statistics showed 8,000 Conferences, 133,000 members, and fifteen million francs distributed to the poor.

Members of the Society displayed care and concern both to civilian casualties and to prisoners during World War I (1914-1918). By war’s end, the principal areas of military operations had suffered great destruction. In its efforts to restore things, the Society in Europe strove to adapt its program and methods to the new social conditions and to penetrate into places where it was previously unknown: China, Japan, Malaysia, Indochina, Burma, India, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, and East Africa saw Conferences established or multiplied.

Thirty-three nations were represented at the centenary celebrations of the Society in 1933. Cardinal Jean Verdier, the Archbishop of Paris designated as the Papal Legate for Pope Pius XI, was greeted on this occasion by civil authorities. In 1950, there were about 20,000 Conferences with an active membership of 250,000 worldwide.

In September 1953, the Society solemnly commemorated the hundredth anniversary of the death of its founder, Frédéric Ozanam. Cardinal Maurice Feltin, Archbishop of Paris and Papal Legate for Pope Pius XII, and Vincentian delegates from around the world attended the ceremonies. Festive occasions such as these have strengthened the bonds of friendship and commonality between members of the Society from the various countries of the world. The Society moves ever closer in fulfilling the vision of its founder, Frédéric Ozanam: “To embrace the world in a network of charity.”

In fulfilling a resolution of the International Meeting of National Presidents of the Society in Paris in 1960, the Council General embarked on an extension and development program throughout the world. The idea of adopting Conferences (Twinning) between nations was initiated. This later led to self-help projects, assistance in times of national disaster, and, finally, Council-to-Council adoptions. International Congresses were convened in Europe, South America and Southeast Asia in order to develop a closer liaison and knowledge of the Society between members in many countries. The International Meeting of 1960 was followed by similar meetings in Paris (1963 and 1967), Dublin (1973), Paris (1979), Montreal (1986), Paris (1992) and Fatima (1999).

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul continues to expand throughout the world and, as of 2021, was established on five continents, in 152 countries, with approximately 800,000 members in 44,600 Conferences.

The Society in the United States

While historians differ on how the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was introduced into the United States, all agree that it was established at the “Old Cathedral” (the Basilica of Saint Louis, King of France), St. Louis, Missouri, in 1845. Both laity and clergy played important roles in its foundation.

Father John Timon, Provincial Superior of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States and later Bishop of Buffalo, New York, brought the Society’s Rule in English from Ireland; he, in turn, gave a copy to Bishop Peter Richard Kenrick. Bishop Kenrick asked Father Ambrose Heim, one of his diocesan priests stationed at the Old Cathedral, to establish a Conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Father Heim was known by the people of St. Louis for his extraordinary zeal and ministry with the poor.

Both Fathers Timon and Heim have often been credited with the actual foundation of the Society in the United States. Rather than referring to either of them as “principal founder,” it would be more appropriate, and accurate, to refer to Father Timon as the person who advocated for the Society, inspiring the idea of founding the first conference, and to Father Heim as the spiritual advisor and the essential “Spiritual Animator” of the first Conference. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is first and foremost a lay organization. The conference would never have opened without the consent of dedicated lay people willing to serve in this new role. The most significant founders, therefore, of the first conference were the St. Louis laymen who willingly accepted the initial invitation offered them to become members and who rose to the challenge of living out the Rule. Among those early members, two can be singled out as the key leaders or principal founders: **Moses Linton**, the first elected President, and **Bryan Mullanphy**, the conference’s first Vice President.

Dr. Moses Linton (1808-1872), a medical professor at St. Louis University, started the famous St. Louis medical journal in 1843. A convert to Catholicism, Linton had arrived in St. Louis from Kentucky in the fall of 1842. Moses Linton was present on that night in November of 1845 when some of the best and brightest of St. Louis gathered together for a historic moment in the Society’s history. It was at that first meeting that his name was suggested for the position of President. He was duly elected by those present. He would serve in this capacity until 1847 and would serve again as President beginning in 1849 (there were as yet no specific terms or term limits for leadership).

Bryan Mullanphy (1809-1851), however, should be singled out for special recognition. It was his organizational skills, his influential connections, and his philanthropic generosity that were vital to both the establishment and the initial growth of the fledgling conference.

Bryan Mullanphy was an essential participant in the first meeting on November 20. It was Mullanphy who chaired that first meeting and who conducted the process of electing officers. Because of his connections and influence, in all likelihood, he was instrumental in bringing together the men who formed that first conference. Mullanphy had already been actively engaged in other philanthropic projects. When Dr. Linton stepped down from the presidency in 1847, Mullanphy was duly elected to succeed him. It was Mullanphy who was charged with writing the Society in Paris to obtain official aggregation, because of his facility with the French language. And there is little doubt that his great generosity with his own wealth provided the young conference with the required wherewithal to do much good in relieving the needs of the less fortunate in St. Louis.

The first official meeting of the Society in the United States was held on November 20, 1845. Application for affiliation with the Society in Paris followed quickly, and the American Conference was aggregated by the Council General on February 2, 1846.

St. Louis did not remain the only conference for long. Just as the Society had spread throughout France with such rapidity, so did it spread throughout the United States. The chief promoters of the Society were the American bishops, many of whom personally established the Society in their dioceses.

Early foundations included New York City and Buffalo, 1847; Milwaukee, 1849; Philadelphia, 1851; Pittsburgh, 1852; Louisville, 1853; Brooklyn, 1855; St. Paul, 1856; Chicago and Washington DC, 1857; New Orleans, 1858; Dubuque, 1859; San Francisco, 1860; Boston, 1861; Baltimore, 1864; Cleveland, 1865; Cincinnati and Portland, Oregon, 1869; San Antonio, 1871; and Detroit, 1884. New York City organized the first District Council in the United States in March 1857.

Council of the United States

After 1860, several major Society centers developed and reported directly to the international headquarters in Paris. From time to time, General Assemblies of the Society were convened. The first took place in New York in 1864. However, it was not until 1915 that a unifying national council was approved and established. In that year, the seven major independent jurisdictions – New York, St. Louis, New Orleans, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn – agreed to form a single national body. The Superior Council of the United States was officially instituted by Paris on June 7, 1915.

Formal inauguration ceremonies took place at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., on November 21, 1915. Thomas Mulry, referred to by some as “the American Ozanam,” served as the Council’s first President. He was a logical choice because he was president of the Council of New York and was an active Catholic layman. Unfortunately, he died unexpectedly of pneumonia in the following year and was succeeded by George Gillespie, who held the position for almost thirty-six years. Under Gillespie’s administrative hand, the Society experienced notable growth.

Each of the succeeding National Presidents of the Council of the United States has been associated with a particular phase of Vincentian organization or activity, as well as its expansion. The story of the Society in the United States constitutes a significant chapter in Catholic social action and the Catholic Charities movement. In the beginning, Vincentian efforts were largely parish-based. Following the example of the earliest Conferences in France, members were inspired through their home visits to address the broader needs and problems of immigrants and others that they served. Solicitude for immigrants impelled Vincentians to investigate and try to change conditions in public life that were prejudicial to the faith of Catholics. The Society founded or helped to establish such institutions as the Catholic Protectory in New York, the Industrial School for Boys in Chicago, and St. Vincent’s Home for Boys in New Orleans. The Society founded boys’ clubs, libraries, and home-finding bureaus; they worked with juvenile officers to provide rehabilitation rather than punitive care for errant youngsters.

Just as the Society was first to challenge public child-care policies hostile to the rights of Catholic children, so also was the Society among the first to recognize the many genuine contributions of non-Catholics and secular organizations and to establish sound and cordial working relationships with such groups.

The late Msgr. John O’Grady, a significant leader of Catholic Charities in the United States, credits the Society with being a prime originator and sustaining force in developing among Catholics a consciousness of national socio-religious problems and the need for a national response. The Society is continuing this commitment to social justice through its national committee, Voice of the Poor. Vincentians became, in fact, the backbone of the National Conference of Catholic Charities when it was first established in 1910. The two organizations have maintained strong ties throughout their separate but closely associated histories.

1.3 THE RULE

The founding members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul immediately realized that the growth of the Society from a single Conference into an organization of many Conferences necessitated regulations that would help preserve the objectives and spirit of the original foundation. In 1835, two years after founding, the Society formulated its Rule, a series of Articles based upon the practical experiences of the first Vincentians. They emulated their patron, St. Vincent de Paul, who also had waited before he wrote the Rule for his priests and brothers and the Rule of the Daughters of Charity, thereby basing the Rule upon their lived-out experiences. The Rule of the Society has continued as the guide and blueprint for the Society for more than 185 years. This, alone, is a tribute to its efficacy and to the Holy Spirit who inspired it.

All groups require rules for effective operation. Our Rule is internationally approved and drawn from the lives and experience of all Vincentians throughout the world. It describes the elements that are needed to maintain the unity of the Society. In truth, the Rule has kept us bound together in solidarity with Vincentians locally, nationally, and internationally.

Adherence to the Rule

The Rule applies to every member of the Society. The International Council General's position on compliance with the Rule is as follows:

Our Society is a free and fraternal association. No one can be compelled to remain in it against one's will. Therefore, a member, Council, or Conference choosing to belong to the Society must be in accord with the Rule in every respect, in particular to:

- Give evidence of spiritual and moral adhesion to the mission, vision, and values of our Vincentian vocation.
- Attend the meetings of the Society.
- Produce regular reports on the various activities.
- Contribute, in a spirit of solidarity, to the expenses of the next higher Council which, in turn, will fulfill its duties.

The Rule is not restrictive but liberating and life-giving. It expresses who we are, what we are, where we have been, and who we want to be. The Rule should neither be ignored nor worshipped, but rather held up as an expression of oneness with Vincentians worldwide. It should be the rallying point for our celebrations and thanksgiving.

The Rule is stable but not static. Additions were made in 1839. When the Society's growth made clear the need for national structure, a section on Superior Councils was added to the Rule in 1850. Articles with respect to Central or (Arch)Diocesan Councils were formulated in 1856. When Vincentian experience revealed the need for clarification or reinterpretation, Commentaries to the individual Articles of the original Rule were introduced. On several occasions – in 1935, for example, and again in 1953 – a thorough reworking of Rule and Commentaries was undertaken by the Council General in Paris. Substance was not affected. One can readily discern the Rule of the 1870s in the Society's Rule and Commentaries of the 1950s, the 1970s, and now, in the new millennium, in the Rule approved in 2003.

The Rule – Revised and Approved in 1973

New influences surfaced in the 1960s. The President General of the Society, Pierre Chouard (1955-69), put before the Society a challenging program of “renewal” based on considerations of spirituality, universality, extension, youth, training, adaptation, and cooperation. The Society throughout the world responded enthusiastically to the challenge of the renewal program. The directives of the Second Vatican Council (1963-65) brought about a further intensification of effort. This renewal was eventually translated into a rethinking of the Society's Rule. Following worldwide Vincentian study, the Council General in 1968 adopted a five-year experimental Rule. This revision formalized certain changes that had been taking place in Vincentian thinking and practice. For example, provision was made for the admission of women and for fixed periods of presidential office. The notion of the Vincentian Family – the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul – embracing those serving and those served was promulgated.

In 1973, at the International Assembly in Dublin, Ireland, the findings of the International Commission on the Rule were reviewed and debated. The move from experimentation to articulation of a modern Rule was then approved.

At its National Meeting in Cincinnati, September 1975, the Council of the United States adopted the General Council's working model for Conferences and Councils and decided to create Commentaries to accompany it. A committee chaired by former National President T. Raber Taylor presented the proposed Commentaries at the National Meeting in Atlanta in September 1978. Revised and then adopted in Chicago at the Midyear Meeting in April 1979, this version of the Rule and Commentaries guided the Society until 2003.

The Rule – Revised and Approved in 2003

At the beginning of the new millennium, an International Committee once again was assigned to study and renew the Rule. Since the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is called to carry on a ministry in the Church, it is held accountable for the grace that has been handed down since 1833. The wisdom of the Church mandates the establishment of the mission, spirituality, accountability, and governance of all Church organizations. The Rule and Statutes define the policies and procedures by which the mission and ethos of the Society are translated into everyday operations, providing a framework for every Vincentian in the world.

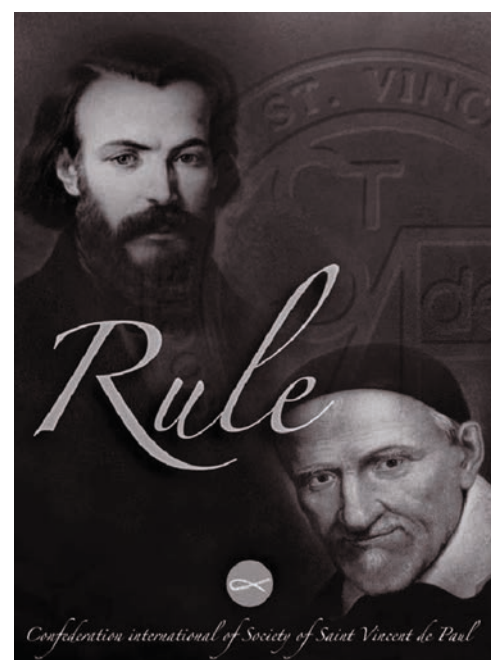
The **Rule**, approved in 2003, consists of three parts:

Part I: The Rule of the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Part II: Statutes of the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Part III: Statutes of the National Council of the United States, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Inc.

The Rule has been designed and written in such a way as to ensure that the basic spirituality and principles contained in Part I of the document remain the same, but the Statutes in Part II and III can be updated when needed. Part I and Part II can be changed only by the International Council; Part III can be changed by the National Council of the United States with approval from the International Council. Part III was mostly revised in 2018. The entire Rule and Statutes in their three Parts must be treated as a single legal document; however, the first part, entitled “Rule of the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul,” takes precedence over the other two.



Bylaws

Bylaws are significant written rules by which an organization is governed. Bylaws determine how the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is structured and, along with state law, determine the rights of participants in the structure.

At the National Meeting in Chicago, September 2005, the Board of Trustees approved model Bylaws for Conferences, District and (Arch)Diocesan Councils, and the National Council. These Bylaws are revised from time to times in order to comply with changes in the Rule, as well as applicable legal and regulatory requirements. Membership in the National Council of the United States, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Inc. requires that every organizational unit (Conference and Council) have Bylaws.

The Rule is the paramount authority of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Should any bylaw, rule, or regulation adopted by a Conference or Council conflict with the Rule and statutes of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul as now promulgated or hereafter adopted by the International Council General or the National Council of the United States, such bylaw, rule, or regulation shall be void and of no effect.

To remain in good standing, Conferences and Councils must maintain their Bylaws (including any and all amended articles) in updated and amended form. The Conference or Council must keep a copy of their Bylaws together with the document of the Rule.





CHAPTER 2

Vincentian Organization

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL PARIS, FRANCE

152 Countries—5 Continents—44,600 Conferences and 800,000 Members

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE UNITED STATES ST. LOUIS, MO

*66,770 Active, 30,799 Associate
A total of nearly 100,000 members in 9 Regions throughout the US.*

(ARCH)DIOCESAN COUNCILS

54 (Arch)Diocesan Councils uniting and supporting the District Councils

DISTRICT COUNCILS

500 District Councils uniting and supporting the Conferences

CONFERENCES

4,428 Conferences, the basic unit of organization

December 2021

2.1 CONFERENCE

Conferences are governed by the policies, Bylaws, Rule, and traditions of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Introduction

The Conference is the basic unit of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and the center of our friendship, spirituality, and service. In the United States, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has two types of membership: Active and Associate (**Rule: Part III, Statute 3**).

The mission of the Conference is the mission of the Society: to join together in a bond of friendship, and to grow spiritually by offering person-to-person service to those who are needy and suffering, in the tradition of our founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, and patron, St. Vincent de Paul. For a specific period of time, the Conference chooses qualified members for the various leadership positions (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.11 and Part III, Statutes 11 & 12**).

The person-to-person work of most Vincentians is associated with a Conference operating within a Catholic parish, but the Society's Rule allows for great diversity in the formation of Conferences. They may be established at elementary schools, high schools, and universities, or around particular ministries: to prisoners, residents of nursing homes, and shelters, etc. The unifying factor may even be a common professional background or cultural interest.

In the Church today, many people recognize the call of the Gospel of Jesus and the need to serve others. The Society strives to be creative and discover opportunities for meaningful charitable work. It seeks to enlarge the scope of its concern by reaching the hidden and new poor, and to match the skills and interests of all its members with the needs of people (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.5**). The Conference provides willing Christian helpers with opportunities to minister to those in need on a person-to-person basis through homes visits, and to serve in its special projects or those of the District and (Arch)Diocesan Councils. No work of charity is foreign to the Society (**Rule: Part I, Article 1.3**).

The Conference must create awareness for itself in the parish community, finding ways to keep parishioners informed about its charitable works and inviting them to become part of this special ministry. Its President is responsible for maintaining communication with the parish staff, parish council, and other parish social ministry programs.

Ministry of the Conference

Ministry is the bridge that connects the Gospel to the needs of God's people. Through ministry, we share with others a glimpse of Jesus. The ministry of a Conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is to bring concrete aid and the comfort of the Gospel to those who are poor and suffering. This loving service, in turn, brings each member closer to God. This ministry witnesses to the world that Christ and his Gospel message are alive today and being preached through action at the local level. Works on behalf of our brothers and sisters who are poor are the most vivid expression of Christ's presence in the world. Such works Jesus willed to be signs of his messianic mission in the world:

John in prison heard about the works Christ performed, and sent a message through his disciples to ask him, "Are you 'He who is to come' or do we look for another?" In reply, Jesus said to them: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them. Blest is the one who finds no stumbling block in me." (Mt. 11: 4-5)

Vincentians engage in many types of ministry. The specific ministry of the Conference belongs not only to the Society, but to all Christian people. As a catalyst and conscience of the local Christian community, the Society cooperates with parish organizations, neighboring Conferences, and social service agencies. It avoids competition and duplication and welcomes assistance from anyone who is sincere and prepared to help, even in a small way. The Society plays a leading role in cooperating with others; it cannot do it alone.

If the Conference is parish-based, everyone living in the parish neighborhood should be served, whether they are parishioners or not, since all are joined together through the realities of creation and redemption. The Conference recognizes its responsibility toward all its neighbors as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Vincentians find inspiration in Christ's life of service to others. St. Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frédéric Ozanam captured this spirit and made it part of their lives and works. This is the heritage transmitted to all Vincentians.

The Society's special ministry of aid to the needy should be seen in the broader context of the Church's saving mission and understood as part of it. The Church, like the Lord Jesus, exists to announce the coming of God's Kingdom, to be a sign of its presence in time, and to usher in the Kingdom of God through various good works. The Church's mission is to bring the Gospel and holiness to all and to transform and renew all creation by making present Christ's redemption. The Church offers many opportunities for experiencing the redemption or healing presence of Christ: in the liturgy and the sacraments, in scripture and prayer, and in the personal relationships that Vincentians establish among themselves and with those they serve. It is in this last category, person-to-person relationships, that the ministry of the local Conference of the Society is predominantly found. (**Rule: Part I, Article 2.6**)

Procedures for Admitting Members

The President of the Conference is usually the member initially involved when someone asks to become an Active Member of the Society at the local parish, or when an Active Member proposes a possible candidate. The President contacts potential members and privately discusses their interests, qualifications, and background with them, along with the responsibilities of membership.

These initial meetings and the explanation of membership responsibilities may result in a decision to withdraw or defer the petition for membership. If the decision is to proceed, the President will inform the Conference at a regular meeting about the recommended person. If approved by the Conference, the candidate will be admitted and welcomed, with formal acceptance contingent upon training and discernment.

Commissioning of new members should take place at an appropriate time and occasion, after they have gained experience in the Society, and all members should annually renew their promise of service to the members and to the poor, thereby deepening the spiritual dimension of their vocation (**Rule: Part III, Statute 4**). The usual occasions for commissioning and renewal are Conference and Council liturgies, festival meeting celebrations for St. Vincent and/or Blessed Frédéric in September, and Ozanam Sundays in April. The publication *Vincentian Celebrations*, available from the National Council, is an important resource of prayer services for these occasions.

Formation of Members

The **Rule** unites all Vincentians throughout the world. It mandates the formation of its members and officers, in order to increase their knowledge of the Society, deepen their spirituality, and help them improve their service to the poor (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.12**).

In 2002, the National Council of the United States approved the foundational document *Vincentian Formation* for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States. Section I of this document clarifies the vision, process, and key assumptions of formation; develops the human, spiritual, intellectual, and ministerial areas of formation; and identifies the core values and virtues for Vincentians. Section II gives the objectives and roles for leadership and service. The National Council currently offers many formation programs, with the commitment to continue developing programs in the future.

Indeed, membership in the Society involves lifelong formation. Effective membership requires a kind and loving heart, formed in the Vincentian spirit. Initial formation for new members is provided informally by the local Conference.

The *Vincentian Reflections* and *Vincentian Contemplations*, available from the National Council, allow members to continually deepen their knowledge and understanding of Vincentian spirituality, personally and as a community of friends. Our Vincentian charism challenges us to find the Christ hidden in each other and in those we serve. The spiritual formation program *Serving in Hope*, created by the National Council of the United States, is an essential tool for Conferences

and Councils. Because they are called to bring the love of God to the poor and suffering, all Vincentians must become rooted in the spirituality that is the heart and soul of the Society. The *Serving in Hope* program deepens the understanding of how a Vincentian lives and acts in the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frédéric Ozanam. *Serving in Hope* consists of the following modules:

- Module I: Our Vincentian Vocation**
- Module II: Our Vincentian Spirituality**
- Module III: Our Vincentian Heritage**
- Module IV: Our Vincentian Mission**
- Module V: Our Vincentian Rule**
- Module VI: Our Vincentian Conference Life**
- Module VII: Our Vincentian Home Visit**

District and (Arch)Diocesan Councils provide the national *Ozanam Orientation* program for new and veteran members, so they can better understand the nature and purpose of the Society and develop the attitudes and knowledge necessary to serve and empower the needy.

Conference members recognize the importance and value of attending the Society meetings at the local, diocesan, regional, and national levels which offer formation and training sessions. Such encounters foster the spirit of friendship that Frédéric Ozanam considered a primary goal of the Society. Attending these Society meetings is a basic Vincentian commitment, ensuring the growth of Vincentian spirituality and molding members into true successors of Frédéric Ozanam. Members who habitually miss Society meetings risk spiritual stagnation, forgetting what their Vincentian charism means and who they are called to be.

Conference Meetings

Conference meetings are privileged occasions during which members manifest Christ's love to one another and experience his healing presence. Conferences meet regularly and frequently, at least twice a month, in celebration of mutual friendship and out of a passion to serve the Lord (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.3, 3.3.1 and 3.4; Part III, Statute 5**). Unlike other organizations within and outside the Church, the Conference meets less to conduct business than to celebrate and deepen its unity for essentially spiritual reasons. Opening and Closing Prayers, together with spiritual reflections, heighten our awareness of the Holy Spirit's presence (**Rule: Part 1, Article 2.3**).

Every Conference meeting includes a spiritual component that promotes active participation and discussion. The presence and participation of the Conference's Spiritual Advisor are especially important. The *Vincentian Reflections*, provided by the National Office, are a vital resource for all Conferences. St. Vincent drew his teaching from the Gospel and from Life. He wanted his followers to integrate the Gospel into the whole of their lives. Vincent's legacy has the simplicity of everyday life and the penetrating strength of God's word.

The *Vincentian Reflections* are based on the Sunday Gospel of the Liturgical Calendar and the scripture readings of the Vincentian feast days. Each reflection offers time for prayer, silence, and discussion so that the Word of God can penetrate our Vincentian hearts. Vincentians grow in spirituality as they actively participate in these discussions, relating the words of scripture to their service of the poor.

The typical agenda for Conference meetings can be found in the **Rule: Part III, Statute 7**. Praying and reflecting together, Vincentians use these occasions to review their contacts with the needy in a simple format. They exchange communications, take stock of their funds, organize their activities, and take up a secret collection to support their works in the tradition of the secret collections of the first Conference. The regularity of these meetings is the key to developing an effective team effort and achieving the goals of the Society.

The Rule requires Conferences to meet weekly or at least twice a month. All conferences should prayerfully consider how best to meet this requirement, not only to comply with the Rule, but because meeting less frequently can adversely affect the poor and impede the ongoing spiritual growth of the members. It is primarily in our Conference meetings that members “journey together towards holiness (**Rule: Part I, Article 2.2**).”

Conference meetings should not be lengthy. Officers and members can ensure brevity by spending a few minutes before each meeting making sure necessary materials are readily available. Outside matters should be left for discussion after the meeting is over.

The Conference meeting must maintain a welcoming environment, so that men and women of all ages and backgrounds can work together and share their Christian values. Members should keep Conference meetings interesting, focused, productive, and convenient for everyone who might want to join.

Members can improve their helping skills by visiting the needy, primarily in their homes, and then reviewing the details of the visit with other members at the Conference meeting. Members should try to learn from their experiences, seeking the insights and advice of other Conference members to become more skillful in the art of helping people. Everyone learns, and solutions come more easily, when all members collectively analyze a problem.

Indeed, it is in the Conference meetings that members can experience Christ’s presence in each other and the workings of the Holy Spirit. In a sense, these gatherings become a living, vivid witness of God’s healing presence among all. These unity-building occasions foster personal renewal and rededication to service. Conference gatherings provide a dynamic environment for learning about life, human problems, and Christian solutions. They also develop a Vincentian spirituality which emphasizes the love and service of the needy and suffering. The friendship among members encourages spiritual growth and leads all members to a greater identity with the person of Christ (**Rule: Part III, Statute 16; Part 1, Articles 2.2, 3.3**).

Home Visits

From the Society's beginning, the central and most basic activity of Conferences has been visiting the needy in their homes. This is the clearest symbol of our Vincentian charism, which dictates the highest respect for the dignity of the poor. It symbolizes our Vincentian commitment truly serve those in need, rather than requiring them to come to us. In their own home, people feel most free to confide their stories of struggle. In that family setting, Vincentians are asked to listen, offer humble advice, and render assistance. Vincentians visit not merely to drop off groceries or pay a bill, but to form relationships based on trust and friendship (**Rule: Part I, Articles 1.2 and 1.7-1.12; Part III, Statute 8**).

In the modern world, there are certain situations when a home visit is not possible or advisable – for example, those involving homelessness, battering, or safety. Nevertheless, Vincentians should never excuse themselves lightly or regularly from the tradition of home visitation. Even when assistance is given in an emergency from the parish or other service site, Vincentians should follow up with a home visit.

Vincentians always visit in pairs. This practice emphasizes the Conference's status as a community, not a collection of individuals who "do their own thing." The visiting team is ideally composed of Vincentians of both genders, various age groups, and different life experiences, so that a better perspective of the needy person's situation can be gained, and various courses of action explored. From the beginning, Vincentian visitation to the needy was done in pairs for the protection both of the needy person and the members. The precedent was set by Christ Himself, when He sent out the Apostles two by two (Mk 6:7). The Society wisely continues this tradition in the interest of safety, liability, and propriety.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality, based on the individual's right to privacy, has both legal and ethical implications. Disclosures made to a Vincentian member and Conference by an individual or family may be revealed to others only under specified conditions, and solely for the purpose of providing help. Only in rare circumstances may information be released without the informed consent of the individual or family, such as when persons pose a genuine threat to themselves or others. If time allows, the member should check with the local Council before acting. Local Councils should have an attorney they can contact in such an emergency. Confidentiality does not prevent a Conference from publicizing its work in general terms.

Confidentiality has always been an important value for the Society. Trusting relationships develop between Conference members and the persons they serve. Confidentiality is a prerequisite for membership in the Society; a breach of confidentiality may be grounds for requesting a member's resignation.

Maintaining confidentiality can be a challenge. With fewer resources and more people in need, Conferences may find it prudent to collaborate with other groups, but collaboration may entail sharing information about persons served. Computers facilitate this sharing, but ever-changing privacy laws must be obeyed and lawsuits avoided. Utility companies and other agencies with national databanks may require Conferences to provide written permission from those they serve.

Handling Confidential Information

Vincentian members and Conferences rely on factual, often very personal information to determine a person's actual need and offer real help. The only appropriate place to share such information is at the Conference meeting. Members should not divulge details to their family or friends, or publicize even general information that might identify the persons helped. The necessary accounting to supporters should consist of statistics, financial reports, the types of cases handled, etc. Stories provided to local media must protect confidentiality or include the written permission of the person helped.

Verbal permission should suffice from persons needing help with basics such as food, utilities, rent, etc. Written permission is advisable for people who have more personal complications, such as medical or legal problems. A sample release form is available from the National Council.

Because people tend to share personal information more freely with their Vincentian visitors in the relaxed atmosphere of their own homes, Society members should be careful to record only what is essential to serve them. Before sharing any of that information with other agencies, they should know and understand their privacy policies. Members may also want to discuss the issue of confidentiality with the persons being helped. The National Office of the Council of the United States can offer helpful advice in this sensitive area.

Services Offered by Conferences

The work of Conferences is as varied as the Conferences and the communities in which they serve. As Bl. Frédéric once advised, “in such a work it is necessary to give yourself up to the inspirations of the heart rather than the calculations of the mind. Providence gives its own counsel through the circumstances around you, and the ideas it bestows on you. I believe you would do well to follow them freely and not tie yourselves down with rules and formulas (1838 letter a new Conference).” Below are some examples of works undertaken by Conferences:

A. Poverty Services

- Material or financial assistance for short-term or continuing needs.
- Emergency aid, combined with referral to an appropriate public agency when eligible for continuing assistance.
- “Filling the gaps” in services provided by the local community, such as help with finding employment or housing.
- Self-help programs such as food and repair co-ops, credit unions, home services for the aged and infirm, housing rehabilitation, legal services, and adult education. These can alleviate the need for recurrent handouts, which can undermine human dignity.
- Development of inexpensive recreational programs for the economically disadvantaged, such as arranging for the use of local facilities, for a nominal fee, by low-income families, senior citizens, and other special groups.
- Development of low-cost professional and household services for needy families. Volunteers are recruited from such professions as plumbing, carpentry, nursing, law, medicine, etc.
- Domestic twinning: sharing of the membership and material resources of a more fortunate Conference with a needier one locally.

B. Information and Referral Services

- Providing information about services related to poverty, medical-emotional needs, family and personal problems, youth counseling and youth activity programs, senior citizens programs and facilities, etc.
- Advocacy on behalf of persons being denied services to which they appear to be entitled.
- Conducting or sponsoring educational programs to acquaint parishioners with community welfare and counseling programs.

C. Services for Emergencies and Special Needs

- Temporary homemaker service. All families face a crisis occasionally — through illness, hospitalization, death, etc. — and can use help with child care, meal preparation, and basic housekeeping until the crisis subsides. If the need exceeds parish capabilities, referral should be made to appropriate community homemaker agencies.
- Transportation. Because the elderly are often dependent upon others for shopping, attending church, and visiting doctors' offices and clinics, escort services and transportation are necessary components of any reasonably adequate program of home care.
- Person-to-person sharing of expertise — in budgeting, nutrition, housekeeping, application for employment, child care, home maintenance, etc. Such service may also be offered as special parish educational programs or group classes.
- Youth services. Addressing the cultural, social, spiritual, and recreational interests of young people, these services rely heavily upon youth initiative and decision-making but also offer opportunity, counsel, and support.

D. Services to the Lonely and Alienated

- Conference members visit lonely or alienated individuals in institutional and medical facilities. Sickness, drug addiction, and mental illness may underlie their problems and special needs. As lay volunteers, Conference members become involved only after consulting with the appropriate facility staff.
- Conference members visit crime victims, and men and women who are incarcerated or on probation or parole. Continuing contact with the families of inmates may be helpful. Intelligent involvement requires consultation and collaboration with criminal justice officials.
- Regular visits to patients in hospitals, nursing homes, and homes for the aged help keep them alert and engaged.
- Regular visits to the homebound sick or aged reassure them that someone cares and is nearby in time of need.
- Home care services, which enable persons to keep living at home, may include the following:
 1. Preparation and delivery of meals
 2. Providing opportunities for leisure by “relieving” family members caring for an aged relative
 3. Home maintenance (e.g., chores and minor repairs)
 4. Tele-care (checking in by phone to converse and make sure needs are met)
 5. Transportation to stores, doctors' offices, church, etc.
 6. Recreational services (activity and companionship in the home, or at a center to which the older person is transported)
 7. Special personal services provided by volunteers (barbers, beauticians, etc.)

- Recruitment of seniors to help provide social services to various agencies. Many retired persons have abilities and experience ideal for helping our brothers and sisters in need. Volunteering can give them a renewed sense of personal well-being and worth.

E. Long-Term Relationships Based on Trust and Friendship

Mentoring those who wish to move permanently out of poverty; encouraging them to dream big, to set and achieve goals, and helping to connect them with others in the community who can help along the way. Following the tradition of the very first conferences by establishing programs to help people transform their lives, such as *Getting Ahead* and *Neighborhoods of Hope*. The National Council provides assistance in creating these programs and other Systemic Change programs.

F. Services to Promote Social Justice

- Every Vincentian needs to understand the Society's priorities and motivation in advocating for the poor (**Rule: Part I, Articles 7.1-7.9; Part III, Statute 29**). The Voice of the Poor, a national committee of the Society, upholds Catholic Social teaching by researching, validating, documenting, advocating, and promulgating issues related to the condition of the poor and disenfranchised.
- At the parish level, social justice can be promoted by publicizing the problems of the poor, providing a forum to discuss poverty issues and society's proper response to them, and seeking to inform and influence public opinion.
- At the local, state, and federal levels, promotion of social justice requires advocacy, and the establishment and operation of programs, benefits, and services that address the root causes of want and encourage respect for human life and dignity.

Funds of the Conference

The Society has held from the beginning that the funds donated to the Conference belong to the poor (**Rule I: Article 3.14**). In the role of administrator, the Conference strives to meet the most urgent needs that come to its attention. Conference members should never adopt the attitude that the money is theirs, or that the recipients have to prove that they deserve it. Although common sense in distribution is expected by those who support the Conference, members need to remember that, by and large, they are dealing with individuals and families who may be desperate, who often have dysfunctional histories, and who are at a point in their lives when a multitude of problems weigh them down. These are precisely the people whom the Society is called on to serve by bringing them support and hope. Erring on the side of compassion is always advisable.

Although Conference work often involves financial assistance, a Conference's success cannot be judged solely by the amount of money it receives or distributes. Conferences with limited resources can also have a big impact. A member's time and concern may be the best gift a Conference can give to the poor.

Society funds are to be maintained by the Conference, not by the parish. The Conference must have a separate checking account. Priests and Deacons are not to be signors. Society funds must not be commingled with parish or individual accounts. How funds are used should be reported to parish and pastor frequently.

Donations to Conferences — whether they come from church collections, from the members themselves, from benefactors, or from fundraising efforts — are meant to address today’s needs (**Rule: Part III, Statute 25**). It is wrong for a Conference to seek financial security by building up a large balance for the needs of the future. Conference balances generally should not exceed what they expect to spend during an average quarter. Surplus funds should be shared generously with more needy Conferences or the special works of the District Council (**Rule: Part III, Statute 24**).

Funds donated to the Conference must be used only for works that involve the personal service of members of the Society. As generous as the Conference should be to needy individuals, it cannot provide funds to causes outside of the Society, except, occasionally, for other branches of the Vincentian Family. (**Rule: Part III, Statute 26**) The Society does not raise money for activities in which its members are not personally and substantially involved. Above all, the intention of the donor, who chose to give to the Society, must prevail.

Conference Policies in Giving Material Relief

One of the greatest strengths of the Conference is its flexibility. Members who personally encounter the needy individual or family are assumed to have a special insight into the best way to give help. Neither race, creed, church attendance, life style, nor income should automatically qualify or disqualify anyone for assistance. Whenever it can, a Conference should address a crisis quickly. Lack of food is one of the most urgent needs that come to the Conference’s attention. However the Conference chooses to deal with such emergencies — with food given in kind, a voucher or gift certificate to a supermarket — the dignity and confidentiality of the needy person should be protected.

Some persons may seek greater financial assistance from the Conference, such as payment of rent or utility bills. Conferences should always have personal contact with such applicants, even when Conference funds cannot cover the full amount. Conferences can partner with other Conferences, other organizations, or the needy persons themselves to provide a portion of what is needed. It is important not to create dependencies in the people we help. Vincentians need to consider each situation they encounter on its own merits, carefully crafting with the persons in need a resolution to their most pressing problems. Members of the Society understand that people can change self-defeating patterns in their lives when they are encouraged to believe in themselves. Vincentian support frequently takes the form of encouragement and realistic planning, building upon the strengths we find in the struggling individual or family.

Aggregation of Conferences

Just as individual members of the Society are formally incorporated into the Conference, so too must the Conference be joined, or aggregated, with the International Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.8 and Part III, Statute 6**). Aggregation provides official recognition of the Conference’s status as part of the Society and links it and its members with the Society’s visible symbol of unity: the International Council General. The function of the International Council is to preserve among all Conferences the unity of membership and practices that characterizes the organization begun by Blessed Frédéric Ozanam in the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul.

Recruitment

The Conference as a whole, and members individually, should encourage recruitment of new Active and Associate members. Participation in special parish days to acquaint parishioners with parish organizations can be effective, with literature and photographs used to showcase the work of the Society and the Conference's various projects. One-on-one personal recruitment works best. Conferences and Councils should take advantage of the effective recruitment model *Invitation to Serve*, available from the National Council of the United States.

The local Conference must maintain a welcoming environment, so that men and women of all ages, cultures, backgrounds, and abilities can work together and share their Christian values.

Conference members listen with sensitivity to generations and cultures poorly represented in its ranks to find out why they are not attracted to our ministry. Are members a joyful people whose demeanor in service would attract others? The future of the Society lies with each and every Vincentian. Actively inviting others to join is as important as the service rendered to the needy.

M. Pierre Chouard, International President of the Society from 1955-1967, posed this sobering question: "If Frédéric Ozanam, a twenty-year-old college student and founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in 1833, were a college student today with the same soul, the same spirit, the same attraction to sanctity, the same tenderness to the distressed, the same understanding of the world today, would he become a member of one or another St. Vincent de Paul Conference? To tell the truth, who would dare to reply always in the affirmative?" (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.7**)

Termination of Membership

A member is considered to be separated from the Society under the following conditions:

- Voluntary resignation or cessation of effective membership (e.g., protracted unexcused absence from Conference meetings).
- Enforced resignation. Implemented only for grave reasons and for the common good of the Society. Approval for such action must first be obtained from the National President.

(**Rule: Part III, Statute 17**)

In becoming members, Vincentians enter into a familial relationship. As a "family," the Society is attentive to manifestations of slackening interest. Officers and members reach out to absent "brothers" and "sisters," affirming their friendship and assuring them of continuing welcome. If a member's disaffection has been caused by some slight or oversight, the Conference or Council attempts to repair the breach and restore the fullest relationship. Members should pray over the passage in Mt. 18:15-20 concerning fraternal correction and try everything possible to revitalize the relationship.

Guidelines for Effective Conferences

- **Effective Conferences are *reachable*.** Parish-based Conferences must provide a clear means for being contacted. Some use the parish office address and phone number and check in regularly to retrieve messages and correspondence.
- **Effective Conferences *meet regularly*.** The Rule requires weekly or biweekly meetings. At these meetings, all members offer their thoughts and support for providing Christian care to the needy.
- **Effective Conferences are committed to *grow in spirituality*.** Members become friends, care for one another and earnestly follow the Society's religious practices. Like Christ, they identify with the poor, whom they visit promptly, regularly, and attentively.
- **Effective Conferences show *initiative*.** Routine, tradition, and habit do not dictate current thought and action. Can the Conference do more? Alert officers and members continually and deliberately ask, answer, and act on such questions.
- **Effective Conferences have members committed to *formation*.** They read, study, attend lectures and courses, and participate in training sessions organized by their District Council in order to learn more about helping people and solving problems.
- **Effective Conferences *recruit continuously*.** One reason Conferences give for not tackling new problems is lack of personnel. But dramatic vistas are unveiled when members invite new Vincentians to join in the service of the poor.
- **Effective Conferences have *competent leaders*.** The officers of the Conference handle their specific duties with whatever competence they have naturally or can cultivate. They work hard, but share with members the responsibility for decision-making and action.
- **Effective Conferences maintain *ties to the community*.** Helping people today often requires knowledge of and referrals to other public and private agencies. The Conference deliberately makes itself known to these groups and cultivates relationships of mutual respect to facilitate referrals to and from such agencies.
- **Effective Conferences *participate in their Council activities*.** The president or his proxy represents the Conference at District Council meetings. Conference members take part in general meetings and religious observances, and provide support and personnel for the special works of the District Council.
- **Effective Conferences *understand the national and international dimensions of the Society*.** Members show practical concern for the work of the Society in less developed or disaster-stricken areas by generously sharing their resources. If possible, they "twin" with needy Conferences domestically or internationally.

- **Effective Conferences are *both wealthy and poor*.** Their members generously support the work of the Conference and elicit similar generosity from friends of the Society. But the Conferences always seem poor, because they share, thoughtfully and intelligently, whatever they have. They do not save for a rainy day, knowing that many are in need here and now.

Legal and Financial Realities

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul must meet the legal, reporting, and financial obligations required of all nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations. Since these obligations are subject to change and may vary widely from the federal to the state level, from state to state, and even from state to locality, Conferences should consult the National Office for the latest federal requirements and a local attorney for the state and local requirements.

Tax Laws and Financial Records

To protect the Society in the civil arena, Conferences must know the federal and state tax laws that apply to them, have capable local counsel to determine what their obligations are, and assiduously meet these obligations. Under certain conditions, charitable agencies and organizations are required to file IRS Form 990. Many U.S. Councils do so. Penalties for noncompliance are cumulative and can be severe.

The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) has prepared statements of accounting principles and reporting practices for nonprofit organizations. Failure to adopt recommended methods could jeopardize community support, foundation grants, and eligibility for publicly-funded programs.

For the Society to maintain good standing before the law and in the eyes of the Church, our donors, and the general public, Conferences must keep adequate records and reports. Proper recordkeeping begins at the Conference level with the Conference treasurer, who must maintain accurate records of all financial transactions. A Conference checking account separate from the individual's own account, and from any parish or other organization's account, is essential. There can be no commingling of funds.

Officers or leaders of voluntary organizations must conform to all procedural requirements of state corporate law, as well as their own charters and bylaws. Strict adherence to all regulations governing recordkeeping and corporate procedures (including regular audits) helps protect the public, the Society, and Vincentian members against deceit and misuse of funds.

Reporting Procedures and Forms

We live today in a time of increasing scrutiny. With our Councils and Conferences serving millions throughout the United States, it is imperative that we demonstrate good stewardship by providing accurate, timely information to our Church, our donors, and the general public.

Good recordkeeping is an essential part of Vincentian activity, beginning at the Conference level. While the actual recording of information is the responsibility of the Conference

Secretary, all members should keep written records of their Vincentian activities. A catalogue of recordkeeping materials and other operational resources is available from the National Office.

One such resource is the *Conference Minute Book*, which all Conferences should use. Standardized recording of Conference proceedings ensures uniform data nationwide and facilitates the collection and analysis of annual statistics in the Annual Conference and Council Reports. Only essential identifying information about persons served should be entered in the Minutes; code numbers and initials are preferred to actual names to help safeguard confidentiality.

In addition to the Minutes, Conference visitors should maintain case records for persons served, updating their entries prior to each Conference meeting. These records, like other Conference records, are entrusted to the Secretary for safekeeping. Normally, when a case has been inactive for a three-year period, the case records should be destroyed.

The Conference Treasurer's Handbook is an aid to the Conference Treasurer, who keeps the actual financial records and is responsible, with the President, for dispensing Conference funds. The Conference relies upon the Treasurer for verifying any bills presented to the Conference for payment.

The fiscal year of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul begins October 1st and concludes September 30th. Conferences report their activity for the year to their affiliated Council. Councils compile all Conference reports and forward these compilations to the next higher Council, along with their own reports. The National Council, in turn, collects all the compilations and publishes a *Consolidated Annual Report* that is distributed to all U.S. bishops, all U.S. Congressmen, and all U.S. members of the Society. Donors frequently request this document, as do foundations and federal agencies processing grant applications. The *Consolidated Annual Report* derives its value from the timely, accurate reports of the Conferences and Councils (**Rule: Part III, Statutes 22 & 23**).

Record Retention

In the course of operation, Conferences generate case records, bank statements, invoices, etc. Confidentiality demands that all records on individuals and families served be kept in a secure, private place. Special care should be taken to secure electronic databases and prevent unauthorized access. Confidential material should not be transferred via email or web unless its security is assured.

Because federal, state, and local statutes of limitations vary, Conferences operating special works should check with their auditor or legal counsel and develop their own record retention policy. Conferences that operate no special works, have no payroll, pay no employment taxes, etc. can adopt the record retention schedule below, but should check first with their Council to make sure that no special circumstances apply to them. A Conference Record Retention Policy should dictate the manner in which records are kept secure and confidential, the length of their retention, and the means of disposal (e.g., shredding paper files, destroying computer disks). Records with historical value should be kept permanently.

Retention Schedule:

Annual Conference Report*	Permanent
Letters of Aggregation	Permanent
Bank Deposits	3 Years
Bank Reconciliations	3 Years
Bank Statements	7 Years
Cancelled Checks	7 Years
Invoices Received	7 Years
Case Records & Cards	3 Years
General Correspondence	3 Years
Meeting Minutes	7 Years
Minute Books	7 Years
Treasurer Statements	7 Years

*including statistics, membership list, and items with historical significance

Conflict of Interest Policy

Along with their families, anyone serving the Society in any capacity – member, employee, board member, etc. – should be careful to avoid real, apparent, and potential conflicts of interest. If a conflict is suspected or anticipated, the Conference President should be consulted immediately. The Society’s official Conflict of Interest policy is intended to supplement applicable state and federal laws. A copy of this policy is available in the members section of the national website or from the National Office. Any questions concerning this policy should be addressed to the appropriate Conference officer.

Speaking for the Society

In recent years, the Society has become more active in social justice work, helping the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves and, when necessary, providing a “voice for the voiceless.” Only the National President may speak for the Society on national issues. Presidents of (Arch) Diocesan Councils, District Councils, and Conferences may speak for the Society at their own levels. Individual members are welcome to engage in advocacy on their own, but should not present themselves as spokesmen for the Society.

Special Masses

Conferences are encouraged to have a Mass offered on five occasions each year for the following persons and groups:

- The Four Intentions of the Society
The Church, the Sovereign Pontiff, the United States of America, the Society
- The Deceased Members of the Conference
- The Deceased Poor
- The Sick and Troubled Who Seek Divine Help and Cure through Ozanam’s Intercession
- The Canonization of Frédéric Ozanam

2.2 COUNCILS

Councils are governed by the policies, Bylaws, Rule, and traditions of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Introduction

The Society has a simple and effective structure to support its work at all levels. The Councils provide opportunities for developing community, sharing expertise, and keeping Conferences and members in touch with the Society as a whole. They also help maintain the original spirit of spirituality and friendship (**Rule: Part III, Statute 10**).

- The **National Council** coordinates and facilitates the general activity of all the Conferences in the United States, which are divided into eight administrative regions.
- An **(Arch)Diocesan Council** unites the District Councils, providing liaison and communication links between them and the National Council.
- A **District Council** may embrace all the Conferences in an entire town, city, or county; it may conform to the deanery or vicariate boundaries of the Catholic diocese; or it may represent neighborhoods or sections of a large metropolitan area. District Councils evolved as a means to keep individual Conferences in communication with each other and united in spirit.
- **Isolated Conferences** are represented at the (Arch)Diocesan level by the closest District Council in the diocese. In any diocese, there may exist one or more Conferences that are not within the geographic area of a functioning District Council. The Isolated Conference relies on that District Council to convey its views to (Arch)Diocesan leaders or to receive information. The Isolated Conference can obtain the name and address of the (Arch)Diocesan Council President from the National Office. In dioceses where no Council has been organized, all functioning Conferences relate directly to the National Council or to its designated intermediary.

The geographical coverage of a Council depends upon such factors as the population of a community, the number of Catholic parishes, and the number of Conferences in the areas served. These elements, as well as future plans and prospects for the Society's expansion, usually influence decisions about the geographical control to be exercised by any newly created Council grouping.

District Council size varies by practice and geography. District Councils represent a minimum of three and ideally a maximum of twelve Conferences. Uniting Conferences within a more extended circumscription than that of a District Council requires an (Arch)Diocesan Council. Normally, three or more District Councils are to be found in every (Arch)Diocesan Council structure. For fewer than three such groupings in a given diocese, informal contacts usually suffice.

Council Functions

Councils are at the service of all Conferences under their jurisdiction (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.6**). In the United States, District and (Arch)Diocesan Councils have similar responsibilities. Substantial differences between the two are usually limited to geographical coverage and membership constituency. To illustrate: District and (Arch)Diocesan Councils are both involved in extending the Society. The District Council will have as its first task the job of extension within its immediate jurisdiction. The (Arch)Diocesan Council, on the other hand, will want to push for organization in non-organized areas of the diocese; it will be only indirectly involved, by encouragement and evaluation, with the extension work for which its District Councils have immediate responsibility.

The distinction between (Arch)Diocesan and District Council responsibilities may not always be obvious, or precise. In keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, the Society's work should be organized and conducted at the least complex and most proximate level of organization (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.9-3.10**). The Conference, for example, is closest to the people served and serving in a parish. It would be inappropriate, therefore, to transfer the Conference work of home visits to the Society's central administration.

The same principle applies to the roles of (Arch)Diocesan and District Councils. If a District Council can perform a needed neighborhood or community task, the District Council, being closer to its constituent Conferences than is the (Arch)Diocesan Council, shall be the priority instrument for that particular work (**Rule: Part III, Statute 6**).

Council Responsibilities

Councils provide for the spiritual and Vincentian formation of the members, the celebration of festival meetings, and the promotion of friendship among members. Attentive to the needs of those who are poor, they strive to intensify and diversify the services offered.

Councils help in the following areas, as needed: internal and external communication; formation and education; spirituality; reports; collaboration; outreach; advocacy; management of special works; and compliance with the Rule and good governance practices.

Councils help Conferences in their ministry to the needy. For instance, when an individual Conference faces heavy demands for person-to-person financial aid, the Council offers what support it can from the common fund. *Helping* is a word that defines the Vincentian spirit, describing not only the day-to-day services of the Society but also the relationship among members, between Conferences and their District Council, between District Councils and their (Arch)Diocesan Council, and between (Arch)Diocesan Councils and their Regional Chairs and National Council.

Attending Society meetings at all levels promotes the key Vincentian values of mutuality and friendship. To their District Council, Conferences give their ideas, the benefit of their experiences, and the willingness to share responsibility for special works and to assist other Conferences in need. From their District Council, Conferences receive the knowledge and inspiration of fellow members, expanding their Vincentian horizons and developing a sense of worldwide responsibility.

Council Leadership

The founders of the Society, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and his companions, were first and foremost friends. Following Christ's example in the spirit of Vincent and Frédéric, today's Council leaders are called to be servant leaders (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.11 and Part III, Statutes 11 & 12**).

They base meaningful decisions on the consensus of their members, who respect and care for each other as well as the needy. The President is first their friend, and only then the implementer of the Council's responsibilities. In the Society, moreover, the office seeks the person, not vice versa.

Presidents must understand "the big picture" and take the initiative, coaching and encouraging members to understand, shape, and embrace their Council's objectives. They must be committed to the values and goals of the Society overall, and enthusiastic about them. They must study the Rule and Bylaws to understand the essential structure, operations, and functions of all levels of the Society. Most important, they must cultivate a solid familiarity with the lives and spiritual legacies of the Society's patron, St. Vincent de Paul, and its founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam. Presidents must then help all members develop this same understanding of our ministry.

Effective Presidents engender friendships among members of the Council and Conferences and take a team approach to decision-making. Rather than give answers, they ask the right questions. They harmonize discord, heal injuries, protect rights, foster talents, and delegate wisely. They are open to new ideas and collaborate with others to accomplish the goals of the local, national, and international Councils, maintaining communication with all levels.

A District Council President visits Conferences both to teach and to learn, going as a friend rather than a superior, observing the agenda, waiting for an invitation to speak, and offering suggestions prudently.

Council Relationships

The President ensures that the Council has strong working relationships with the local Church and its agencies (e.g., Catholic Charities and Social Concerns), the wider Vincentian Family, and local agencies serving the poor. Though a Catholic lay organization with its own identity, mission, and voice, the Society is very much a part of the Church and its mission. From the beginning of the Society, Vincentians were called to be public witnesses of and for the Church. Blessed Frédéric Ozanam loved the Church and worked closely with the clergy and bishops in Vincentian efforts to serve and evangelize the poor. Likewise, Blessed Frédéric and his companions worked with the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul and Vincentian priests and brothers (Congregation of the Mission). Today, the wider Vincentian Family includes other followers of the charism of St. Vincent de Paul. Escalating needs and limited resources call for greater collaboration among them all.

Council Special Works

Councils undertake charitable works and special projects that exceed the jurisdiction or capacity of an individual Conference (**Rule: Part III, Statute 20**). The particular nature of a Council's special works is influenced by the community's socio-economic needs, the Council's resources, and the zeal, enterprise, talents, and influence of local Vincentians. Special works include thrift stores, dining rooms, food pantries, meals on wheels, free pharmacies, homeless shelters, transitional housing, summer camps for kids, indigent burial, budget and tax counseling, employment services, job training, assistance for the disabled, crime victim support, jail/prison ministry and post-release services, medical and dental clinics, eldercare, and family resource centers.

Council Meetings

To enliven and enrich those who attend, meetings must have meaningful content and spirituality. They should be interesting, informative, and decisive. Especially important is the cultivation of friendship. The President sets the tone, showing the same solicitude for the members that they do for the poor they visit.

Rather than conduct business by mail, phone, or web, Vincentians hold meetings to take advantage of the creative interaction and synergy that can occur in a group. Meetings harness the collective knowledge, experience, and wisdom of the members to create solutions that might elude the individual. When members have taken ownership of them, Council decisions can be implemented more effectively.

Meetings are the Society's most effective form of communication. Careful attention to detail and thorough preparation assure their success. The typical agenda for Council meetings can be found in the Rule: Part III, Statute 7. Well-planned meetings have these four components:

Formation. Time for prayer, faith-sharing, and spiritual formation in Vincentian ministry and service.

Planning. Development and review of a local plan based on the National Strategic Plan.

Work. The chance for everyone to be heard on discussion and decision items within a guided, timed, focused setting. Standard reports are usually mailed to members ahead of time.

Follow-up. A summation of the meeting and what was accomplished, and the preparation of an agenda for the next one. Minutes should be brief, listing the discussion/decision items with their main points, the outcomes, and next steps.

General or Special Meetings

Councils should gather their general Conference membership together several times a year on traditional Vincentian occasions. Attendance at these meetings is an essential part of our Vincentian life, and an ideal time for the following:

- providing programs on Vincentian Spiritual Formation
- renewing the motivation of members
- announcing special news from the Conferences and Councils
- communicating developments within the Society at various levels
- consulting with members and sharing ideas
- providing information pertinent to Conference work (a speaker from outside the Society may be featured)
- showing members the experience and breadth of the Vincentian family

Council/Board Membership

The Bylaws of the Society state that a District Council is composed of a duly elected President and the Presidents of affiliated Conferences; (Arch)Diocesan Council membership is composed of the Presidents of affiliated District Councils. Qualifications for membership on either Council's Board of Directors are spelled out in their bylaws.

Incorporated Councils have a board of directors, whose members should understand their responsibilities and obligations, keeping the Society on a sound legal and financial basis. Information on Council bylaws and governance is available from the National Office and on the website: www.ssvpusa.org.

Council Funds and Accountability

To protect their members, the Society, and the public, Councils should have annual audits conducted according to accepted accounting practices (**Rule: Part III, Statute 27**). They should also prepare annual budgets and present them to their board of directors for approval (**Rule: Part III, Statutes 22 & 23**).

Sources of Council funds may include contributions from Conferences, donations, bequests, special works, and grants. Like Conferences, Councils act as custodians of funds given to the Society, understanding that they belong, ultimately, to the poor. While some Councils prefer not to accumulate funds, others make a point of setting something aside for exigencies. Operating an active Council with a reasonable bank balance is good business practice, not hoarding. A bank balance equal to the operational cost of the Council for six months may be reasonable. A balance of less than three months' operational cost may be unhealthy. Councils with inadequate balances should review the budget for ways to increase their income or reduce their expenditures. Councils with overly large balances should find ways to expend their excess funds on behalf of the poor, such as subsidizing active Conferences in poorer areas or planning needed special works.

Fundraising is conducted within the Conference or Council, and at the National Council level. If a Council or other entity wishes to participate in a fund development project on an interCouncil basis, it should present its proposal in a business plan format to the National Finance and Governance Committee. The Council of the United States has a national development plan to augment funding for its services and to assist Councils in their own fundraising efforts. The National Development Director is available to help Councils enhance their fundraising effectiveness.

Councils may receive funding requests from charitable organizations outside the Society. Funds donated to the Society, however, must be used only for works that involve the personal service of Society members. The Society does not raise or contribute money for activities, no matter how praiseworthy, in which its members are not personally and substantially involved. We must honor the intentions of our donors, who have chosen to give to the Society, rather than other organizations, with the expectation that their gifts will be used for Vincentian work and no other purpose.

Acknowledging Charitable Contributions

Federal income tax deductions for every contribution of \$250 or more require a written receipt from the designated charity. Responsibility for obtaining receipts rests with contributors, but charities must inform them if their contributions may not be fully deductible because of goods or services received in connection with a fundraising event.

Though no particular form is required, a receipt must:

- Show the date of the contribution.
- Accurately describe the cash or property donated.
- State whether or not the contributor received any goods or services of value in return for the contribution and offer a good-faith estimate of their value.
- Confirm, if appropriate, that the contributor received only “intangible religious benefits” in return for the contribution.

Society Employees

In the beginning, the Society relied solely on volunteers to help the poor, but its rapid growth revealed a need for assistance administering and coordinating that volunteer ministry with clerical work, mailings, recordkeeping, etc. (**Rule: Part III, Article 14**) Later, to serve the poor better, members, in the larger Councils especially, established Special Works that required paid staff. Volunteer members and Society employees work together as partners in their ministry to the poor. Paid staff do not supplant the volunteer members; they help those members provide more effective services to people in need. Employees are welcome to participate in Vincentian works and become members of a Conference, but they cannot hold elected office at any level of the Society.

One of the most important responsibilities of larger Councils is the selection of an Executive Director, whose knowledge, skill, and leadership will, to a significant extent, determine a Council's effectiveness in carrying out its mission. Executive Directors help Council Presidents fulfill their responsibilities. They cultivate the talents of Presidents, board members, and Conference members. And they strive to keep the Councils faithful to the Society's mission and its predominantly volunteer character. With Council Presidents being term-limited, Executive Directors also provide continuity and stability.

Councils must establish expectations for the position of Executive Director (qualifications, salary, benefits, etc.) and spell them out in a position description. Sample position descriptions are available from the National Office. A special committee should be formed, composed of officers and chairpersons of other significant committees, to screen, interview, and recommend candidates to the board.

Councils must comply with all state and federal regulations for paid staff and should maintain employment practices consistent with the guidance of the Catholic Bishops and Catholic social teaching.

Legal and Financial Realities

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul must meet the legal, reporting, and financial obligations required of all nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations. Since these obligations are subject to change and may vary widely from the federal to the state level, from state to state, and even from state to locality, Councils should consult the National Office for the latest federal requirements and a local attorney for the state and local requirements.

Institution of a District or (Arch)Diocesan Council

Official recognition of a Council as a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul requires the affirmative action of the Council General, the international governing body of the Society. Application forms for the institution of Councils may be obtained from the National Office of the Council of the United States. **(Rule: Part I, Article 3.8)** Completed applications are transmitted through all ascending levels of the Society. Councils must be in operation for at least one year before applying.

A District Council applying for "institution" (official status) sends its application to the (Arch)Diocesan Council to which it is attached. The (Arch)Diocesan Council, having approved, transmits the petition to the National Council, which conveys it to the Council General for final action. Word of the Council General's action is conveyed to the applicant via the descending chain of communication.

If no (Arch)Diocesan Council exists, a new District Council should seek the approval of a priorexisting, instituted District Council. Until an (Arch)Diocesan Council is formed, the first instituted District Council represents the diocese to the National Council and qualifies as a National Council Member. Three or more District Councils should form an (Arch)Diocesan Council to better serve all the Conference members of the diocese.

Incorporation of Councils

Generally speaking, charitable groups may act as unincorporated associations, formally organized corporations, or charitable trusts. The corporate form is preferred for its convenience, familiarity of structure, and liability limitations.

Councils should incorporate and comply with the laws of their state. The National Office can offer advice on how to proceed. An incorporated Council should check periodically to confirm that its Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws are properly recorded and available to succeeding Council leaders (“Statements of Continued Existence” may also be required in some states). Failure to properly maintain the necessary records can jeopardize the tax deductibility of donor gifts and result in revocation of the Society’s 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status.

Insurance guidelines for Conferences, Stores, and Councils are posted in the members section of the national website. As these guidelines recommend, Councils should contact qualified professionals for advice on coverage for all aspects of a not-for-profit organization and reevaluate their policies yearly.

Tax Laws and Financial Records

To protect the Society in the civil arena, Councils must know the federal and state tax laws that apply to them, have capable local counsel to determine what their obligations are, and assiduously meet these obligations. Under certain conditions, charitable agencies and organizations are required to file IRS Form 990. Many U.S. Councils do so. Penalties for noncompliance are cumulative and can be severe.

The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) has prepared statements of accounting principles and reporting practices for nonprofit organizations. Failure to adopt recommended methods could jeopardize community support, foundation grants, and eligibility for publicly-funded programs.

For the Society to maintain good standing before the law and in the eyes of the Church, our donors, and the general public, Councils must keep adequate records and reports.

Officers or leaders of voluntary organizations must conform to all procedural requirements of state corporate law, as well as their own charters and bylaws. Strict adherence to all regulations governing recordkeeping and corporate procedures (including regular audits) helps protect the public, the Society, and Vincentian members against deceit and misuse of funds.

Record Retention

Confidentiality demands that all records on individuals and families served be kept in a secure, private place. Special care should be taken to secure electronic databases and prevent unauthorized access. Confidential material should not be transferred via email or web unless its security is assured.

Because federal, state, and local statutes of limitations vary, Councils operating special works should check with their auditor or legal counsel and develop their own record retention policy. Records with historical value should be kept permanently.

Retention Schedule:

Bank Deposits	3 Years
Bank Reconciliations	3 Years
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Cancelled Checks	7 Years
Invoices Received	7 Years
Case Records & Cards	3 Years
General Correspondence	3 Years
Meeting Minutes	7 Years
Minute Books	7 Years
Treasurer Statements	7 Years

Conflict of Interest Policy

Along with their families, anyone serving the Society in any capacity – member, employee, board member, etc. – should be careful to avoid real, apparent, and potential conflicts of interest. If a conflict is suspected or anticipated, the Council President should be consulted immediately. The Society’s official Conflict of Interest policy is intended to supplement applicable state and federal laws. A copy of this policy is available in the members section of the national website or from the National Office. Any questions concerning this policy should be addressed to the appropriate Council officer.

Speaking for the Society

Only the National President may speak for the Society on national issues. Presidents of (Arch) Diocesan Councils, District Councils, and Conferences may speak for the Society at their own levels. Individual members are welcome to engage in advocacy on their own, but should not present themselves as spokesmen for the Society.

2.3 NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE UNITED STATES

The Mission and Governance of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are found in the Rule, Council and Conference Bylaws, and appropriate policies.



Official logo of the Council of the United States

Introduction

Instituted by the International Council General, and legally incorporated under the laws of the State of Delaware in 1946, the National Council of the United States represents the Society in this country, animating and coordinating its various activities and assisting the Councils attached to it. The official logo of the Society in the United States is a key building block of our identity, the primary visual element that tells who we are. Guidelines for use of the logo by Councils and Conferences are available from the National Office.

The National Council keeps members of the Society, the Council General, and religious and civil authorities informed of its activities through regular reports. It also keeps U.S. Councils and Conferences informed of the life of the Society throughout the world and ensures that the basic principles of the Society are respected. The Society in the United States is divided into eight regions, with nominees for the National Vice President for the region approved by the National President and elected by each region (**Rule: Part III, Statute 13 and Resolution 184**).

The Regional Structure



Mid-Atlantic

Delaware
District of Columbia
Maryland
New Jersey
Pennsylvania
Virginia
West Virginia

Mideast

Indiana
Kentucky
Michigan
Ohio

Midwest

Arkansas
Iowa
Kansas
Missouri
Nebraska
Oklahoma
Tennessee

Mountain

Arizona
Colorado
Idaho
Montana
Nevada
New Mexico
Utah
Wyoming

North Central

Illinois
Minnesota
North Dakota
South Dakota
Wisconsin

Northeast

Connecticut
Maine
Massachusetts
New Hampshire
New York
Rhode Island
Vermont

South Central

Louisiana
Texas

Southeast

Alabama
Florida
Georgia
Mississippi
North Carolina
Puerto Rico
South Carolina
U.S. Virgin Islands

West

Alaska
California
Hawaii
Oregon
Washington

National Council Strategic Plan

In 2000, under the leadership of its President, Eugene Smith, the National Council of the United States adopted its first formal strategic plan. The Strategic Plan provides a framework for Servant Leaders at every level to make plans unified around the Society's central vision and goals. The Strategic Plan is periodically reviewed and revised as previous goals are achieved, and circumstances change. The current plan at the time of this publication is based upon five Focus Areas, with goals to advance each of them.

- I: Expand and strengthen our network of friends**
- II: Encourage and support Vincentians on their spiritual journey**
- III: Advocate for and work towards a more just world**
- IV: Promote deeper and meaningful relationships with those we serve**
- V: Develop, improve, and expand services**

Rather than an update to the Strategic Plan formulated by a national committee, in 2023, under the leadership of President John Berry, the National Council embarked on a multi-year, synodal process entitled VisionSVdP in an effort to involve all Vincentians in discernment of a revitalized vision of the Society.

National Council Services

Management	Accountability practices	Technology	Development Strategic
National Office	Adherence to the Rule	Computerization	Planning
Administration	Bylaws of the Society	Database	Development on Webpage
Meetings	Policies, procedures, laws	Website	MBNA
International, National, Regional Meeting	Performance objectives	International/National	Volunteer Resources
Planning and Support	Evaluation	Vincentian News	Public Relations
Professional and Staff	Finance, Personnel, Etc.	VincenPaul	
Support for National Committees	Accounting	Circular Letter	Formation
Maintenance/	Payroll	Regional/Council	Programs
strengthening of relationships with Vincentian	Accounts Receivable/Payable	Best Practices	Serving in Hope
Family and government	Personnel	Aggregation/Institution	Forming the Formators
Implementation of Strategic Plan	Resources	Recruitment	Weekly Reflections
Episcopal Advisor relationships	Records	Invitation to Serve	Invitation for Renewal
Management and disbursement of Disaster Funds	Benefits	Recognition	Ozanam Orientation
National President's liaison to Council General and National Councils	Twinning	Archives	Vincentian Contemplations
Conflict resolution team for Councils and Conferences	International	Rule	Home Visit Workshops
	Domestic		Workshops
	Building/Equipment	Development	Leadership development
	Membership & Technology	Annual giving	Board Members
	National Council Communication	Programmatic solicitations	Executive Directors
	Annual Reports	Online Giving	Spiritual Advisors
	Frédéric's eGazette	Planned and Major Gifts	Spiritual Formation
	Email/Web Alerts	Grants	Presentations
	Publications	Endowment Fund	Retreats
	Composition	Corporate Sponsorships	Vincentian Family
	Printing	Donor Tracking System	
	Distribution	Consultation and collaboration with other SVdP Fundraisers	

National Committee Structure

The National Council analyzes emerging or persistent human needs and explores how the Society can respond to them. When a problem has been identified, the National President may establish a committee or a work group to address that problem.

At every level, Councils activate committees corresponding to the National Council priorities, thus assuring national direction within the Society without affecting the autonomy of individual Society units.

National Database

Every organization depends upon effective communication to achieve its goals (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.15**). To help facilitate better communications, a national member database is available to all Conferences at svdpmembers.com. The National Office staff strive to make sure that the National database has accurate and complete information on all members, so that they can keep everyone informed about important matters affecting the Society.

Members have a right to know what is going on and to receive information in a timely fashion. We also have an obligation to keep our contact information current. The vision of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is to “embrace the world in a network of charity.” Our membership database is the nucleus of that network. By keeping every portion of it accurate and up-to-date, we ensure that Vincentians across America stay connected and can embrace the world together.

Conflict of Interest Policy

Along with their families, anyone serving the Society in any capacity – member, employee, board member, etc. – should be careful to avoid real, apparent, and potential conflicts of interest. If a conflict is suspected or anticipated, the Council President should be consulted immediately. The Society’s official Conflict of Interest policy is intended to supplement applicable state and federal laws. A copy of this policy is available in the members section of the national website or from the National Office. Any questions concerning this policy should be addressed to the appropriate Council officer.

Speaking for the Society

Only the National President may speak for the Society on national issues.

Suspension, Annulment, and Removal

The President General has delegated to the National President the authority to suspend Members, Conferences, and Councils; to annul the election of a Conference or Council President, for serious reasons; and, when necessary, to remove a President (**Rule: Part III, Statute 16, 17-19**). A National Conciliation Committee exists (**Rule: Part III, Statute 21**).

2.4 THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL

The Mission and Governance of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are found in the Rule, Council and Conference Bylaws, and appropriate policies.

Introduction

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is united in its spirituality and management through an International Confederation of the Society, which is presided over by the President General. The Confederation's head office is based in Paris, France. **(Rule: Part II, Articles 1.1-1.12)**

The Council General was established in 1840 to aid the International President in animating and directing the Society. The structure of the Council General has changed over the years as the Society has evolved and expanded. **(Rule: Part II, Articles 2.1-2.5 and 5.1-5.6)**

The Council General fulfills several essential purposes, the foremost being to assure the Society's unity in its spirituality and in its emphasis on person-to-person charity. Vincentian unity in these essentials does not mean the imposition of an all-encompassing uniformity and rigidity. While maintaining and promoting what is essential to the original spirit of the Society, the Council General recognizes and respects the cultural and circumstantial differences among countries. **(Rule: Part II, Articles 3.1-2.28 and 4.1-4.8)**

As the very heart of the Society, the Council General stimulates growth and development by encouraging and assisting in the organization of new Conferences and Councils. Only the Council General can authorize the admission of new Conferences and Councils anywhere in the world, thus linking them to the first original Conference and to all Vincentians everywhere. **(Rule: Part II, Articles 6.1-6.11)**

The Council General promotes bonds among Society units and members worldwide, particularly between wealthy and needy countries, the resulting linkage being known as Twinning. It serves to centralize Vincentian resources on behalf of the victims of catastrophes such as floods, earthquakes, droughts, and historical upheavals. It also establishes liaison and cooperation with other international charitable works and programs and with the various international aid organizations. **(Rule: Part I, Article 4.2)**

International Council and Twinning

In many parts of the world, the Society's Councils and Conferences lack sufficient resources to carry out their mission to alleviate suffering. **(Rule: Part I, Article 4.1)** Councils and Conferences in more affluent countries reach out to help their sister and brother Vincentians with their work. Assistance may take various forms, but is most often financial. Any Council participating in a Twinning program, whether giving or receiving, should be duly "instituted" and in regular contact with the Council General's office. Any twinning Conference should be properly "aggregated." Questions about the status of a twinning partner should be referred to the office of the International

Council General. To ensure success, Councils or Conferences desiring to establish a “twinning” relationship should coordinate their donations through the Council General International and the National Councils of the country giving and receiving assistance.

“Assistance” may include financial assistance and spiritual assistance. It may consist of various types of projects. Many situations may require prayer and advice as to how the assistance may best be delivered. The International Council General’s office stands ready to help with recommendations on how to attain the desired goal of assisting brother or sister Vincentians in need.

The Spirituality of Twinning

We must create a culture of international solidarity and cooperation, where all – particularly the wealthy nations and the private sector – accept responsibility for an economic model that serves everyone, where the poor Lazarus can sit beside the rich man, sharing the same banquet and not feeding on scraps that fall from the table (Lk 16:19-31). **(Rule: Part I, Articles 4.1.1 and 4.12)** “Extreme poverty is a source of violence, bitterness, and scandal. To eradicate it is to do the work of justice and, therefore, the work of peace (*Incarnationis mysterium*, 12).”

The Society is a Christian family whose members share their resources. Twinning links brother and sister Vincentians in a special way; it cuts through language and cultural barriers. Through Twinning, Councils and Conferences implement the theological virtue of charity, heighten awareness of the catholicity of the Church, transcend provincialism, and fulfill the Church’s preferential option for the poor. **(Rule: Part I, Article 4.1)** An example for Vincentians, individually and corporately, is the story of the widow’s mite (Mk 12:44-44). Jesus tells his disciples to observe the poor widow: “They gave from their surplus wealth; she gave from her want.” In Twinning, Vincentians strive to give selflessly, not just from their surplus funds but from their want. Current Twinning Guidelines are available from the National Office.

The International Logo

The international logo of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is a fish on a solid blue circle. The Greek word for fish, ICHTHYS, was used by the first Christians as an acronym for *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*.

The blue circle graphically symbolizes the world, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam’s dream of embracing it in a network of charity, and the global status of our International Society.

The red eye of the fish is the vigilant eye of God, seeking out the poor and underprivileged in our midst; its red color symbolizes charity, the love of God and neighbor, and the motive for our service.

The shape of the fish, a loop, symbolizes the solidarity among members and our union with the poor. The Society’s motto, “*Serviens in spe*” (Serving in Hope), signifies the attitude Vincentians bring to those they serve.



Serviens in spe

2.5 SPIRITUAL ADVISORS

Introduction

Because the primary purpose of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is to increase the holiness of its members, the role of Spiritual Advisor is essential to its life and mission (**Rule: Part I, Article 3.13 and Part III, Statute 15**). The Spiritual Advisor assumes responsibility for the spiritual growth, development, and life of either a Council or a Conference with full knowledge of and dedication to the mission and ministry of the Society.

Council or Conference leadership must select a person who is both willing and able to devote the necessary time and energy to the role of Spiritual Advisor. Spiritual Advisors are indeed full Council/Conference members, but they do not serve as officers; if ordained, they do not vote. Often a Catholic lay member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul will be chosen, though an ordained priest or deacon, vowed religious, or parish pastoral staff may fill this role. Within the first Conference of Charity, the Catholic layman Emmanuel Bailly assumed responsibility for the spiritual health of the Conference and its young members and serves as a model for today's Spiritual Advisor.



Functions of the Spiritual Advisor

The Spiritual Advisor's task is that of spiritual animator. The Spiritual Advisor enables members to better understand the meaning of charity and its practical application toward those in need, and assists with the development of their Vincentian spiritual life.

Spiritual Advisors play an important role in promoting the work of the Society. In keeping with changing times and needs, they provide inspiration and challenge for the adoption of new works. The Spiritual Advisor attends the meetings, participates in the discussions, and provides guidance to the Council or Conference membership on spiritual matters. As circumstances permit, Spiritual Advisors actively participate with other members in direct service to the needy.

Appointment of a Conference Spiritual Advisor

The president of the Conference, in consultation with the pastor, appoints the Conference Spiritual Advisor. That person should be dedicated to his or her spiritual life and should understand, or be willing to learn, the meaning and essential features of Vincentian Spirituality. The Conference president may appoint an Associate Spiritual Advisor as necessary.

Appointment of a Council Spiritual Advisor

The selection of a Spiritual Advisor for the District Council should be determined by the prayerful deliberation of the Council members. An incoming District President may reappoint a Spiritual Advisor.

In the case of an (Arch)Diocesan Council, the approval of the local Bishop should be sought. It is wise to have at least two names for his consideration. The Bishop himself may wish to be designated Spiritual Advisor, in which case an Associate Spiritual Advisor should be named who can assume the full functions of the role when the Bishop is unable to participate as actively as necessary. An incoming (Arch)Diocesan President may reappoint a Spiritual Advisor. In other situations, the highest Council in a Diocese approaches the Bishop as described above.

The National Episcopal Spiritual Advisor

Following protocol, the President of the National Council arranges for a member of the hierarchy to serve as the Society's National Episcopal Spiritual Advisor. The Episcopal Advisor attends meetings, participates in discussions, and provides the necessary guidance to the Council and its members on spiritual matters. For the Annual Meetings, he addresses the Society membership on matters of spiritual formation. He also addresses the meeting of Council and Conference Spiritual Advisors, encouraging and animating them in their ministry of spiritual formation of the Society's membership.



CHAPTER 3

Vincentian Spirituality

3.1 FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

The Society of St. Vincent De Paul has, from the beginning, been rooted in the following fundamental principles:

- ***Essential Elements***

The Essential Elements of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (**Rule: Part III, Statute 1**) were established by Emmanuel Bailly together with the founding members:

Spirituality:

To bear witness to Christ and to his Church by showing that the faith of Christians inspires them to work for the good of humanity;

Friendship:

To bring together people of good will and to assist them by mutual example and true friendship in drawing nearer to the Divine Model by fulfilling his essential precept, namely, the love of God in the person of others;

Service:

To establish a personal contact between its members and those who suffer and to bring to the latter the most efficacious and charitable aid possible.

- ***Mission***

A Mission Statement answers the who and what of an organization. It states in precise and concise language the composition and chief purposes of a group:

**A network of friends, inspired by Gospel Values,
growing in holiness and building a more just world through
personal relationships with and service to people in need.**

- ***Identity Statement***

While the Mission primarily states what we do, the identity statement offers a detailed explanation of who we are:

Inspired by Gospel values, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, a Catholic lay organization, leads women and men to join together to grow spiritually by offering person-to-person service to those who are needy and suffering in the tradition of its founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, and patron, St. Vincent de Paul.

As a reflection of the whole family of God, Members, who are known as Vincentians, are drawn from every ethnic and cultural background, age group, and economic level. Vincentians are united in an international society of charity by their spirit of poverty, humility and sharing, which is nourished by prayer and reflection, mutually supportive gatherings and adherence to a basic Rule.

Organized locally, Vincentians witness God's love by embracing all works of charity and justice. The Society collaborates with other people of good will in relieving need and addressing its causes, making no distinction in those served because, in them, Vincentians see the face of Christ.

- ***Vision***

The vision of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam was:

“To establish a network of charity and social justice to encircle the world.”

- ***Cultural Beliefs***

What we believe, our culture, determines how we act in the Society and in the world:

Spiritual Growth:

Grow in holiness through prayer, service, friendship and formation.

One Society:

Contribute to the success of our Vincentian work when we support One Society.

Servant Leaders:

Develop ourselves and others to become Servant Leaders.

Today's Society:

Strengthen the Society by embracing new and diverse ideas and people.

Embrace Accountability:

Build a strong Society by holding each other accountable to our Mission, to the Essential Elements of the Society and to good Governance.

Inclusive Planning:

Foster ownership by involving all members in planning and decision making.

Advocate for Justice:

Advocate along with the poor, for just policies and practices at the local, state, and national levels.

- ***Virtues***

Vincentians seek to imitate St. Vincent in the five virtues essential for promoting love and respect for the poor (**Rule, Part I, Article 2.5.1**):

- Simplicity
- Humility
- Gentleness
- Selflessness
- Zeal

- ***The Call to Holiness***

The Church calls all men and women to holiness because Jesus does. He says: “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:48) St. Paul says it very clearly: “This is the will of God, your holiness.” (I Thess 4:3) The Society of St. Vincent de Paul calls its members to holiness; such was the intent of its founders in 1833 and such is its intent today (**Rule: Part I, Article 2.2**).

The Church teaches that “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength according as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. In this way they can follow in his footsteps and mold themselves in his image, seeking the will of the Father in all things, devoting themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor.” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 40)

Several months before his death in 1853, Blessed Frédéric told members of the Society in Livorno, Italy: The Society “has only one purpose: to sanctify its members in the exercise of charity and to help the poor in their corporal and spiritual needs.” Blessed Frédéric says: “Ordinary Catholics are plentiful enough, everywhere; *but we need saints*. How to make saints without being ourselves holy? How to preach to unhappy people about virtues, in which they are richer than we? We must indeed admit with St. Vincent de Paul that, in that, they are our superiors. ‘The poor of Jesus Christ are our lords and masters,’ said the saint, ‘and we are unworthy to render them our poor service.’” (*Report of the Works of the Society in Lyon, April 27, 1838*)

In the mind of St. Vincent, the person who deals with holy things has to be holy. As Vincentians deal with holy things, the poor, we are called to be holy. Pope Saint John Paul II said that the call to holiness is the essential vocation of all Christians.

St. Vincent de Paul teaches us that holiness is “the retrenchment from earthly things and distancing ourselves from them, and is, at the same time, an attachment to God and union with the Divine Will. I think holiness consists in that.” (XII, 244)

St. Vincent also said: “Perfection does not lie in ecstasies, but in doing well the will of God.... Who, of all men, is the most perfect? He whose will is most in accord with the will of God, since perfection lies in so complete a uniting of our will with God’s that his will and ours are really simply the same will; and the more man excels on this point, the more perfect will he be.” (XI, 317) Frédéric repeated this prayer unceasingly: “O God, I will what you will, when you will, in whatever way you will, because you will.”

- ***Vincentian Ministry***

Vincentians are called to holiness by striving to conform ourselves to Jesus, doing God’s will, and devoting ourselves to the service of God’s suffering and poor. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is composed of women and men who seek personal holiness by works of charity. In this essential way, the Society differs from charitable associations or agencies whose principal objective is not the spiritual advancement of their members but the doing of good for others.

President-General Adolphe Baudon, in his Circular Letter of January 1, 1877, wrote: “It is laid down in our Rule, and it has been always understood among us, that in uniting to serve our masters the poor, as St. Vincent de Paul expresses it, our object is not only to relieve material misery, a very laudable purpose in itself, but to aspire, especially, through the practice of that most sublime of virtues – charity – to render ourselves better and more fervent Christians, and to make our poor enter on the same path, if we have the happiness of succeeding.”

In his Circular Letter of December 12, 1915, President-General Vicomte D’Hendecourt wrote: “The Society has two aims: to do a great deal of spiritual good to its members through the exercise of charity, and to do a little spiritual and temporal good to a few poor families in the name of Jesus Christ. If it did not continually seek to combine these two aims, it would lose its reason for being. If it were to seek only the holiness of its members through pious exercises, there is no lack of Confraternities and Third Orders to meet that need. If, on the other hand, it were to seek only the relief of the temporal miseries of the poor, it would only add one more to the list of public and private institutions founded for that purpose.”

Our Vincentian ministry is a means for achieving holiness. Serving those who are poor increases our holiness, because, when we attend to them in the spirit of St. Vincent, we minister to Jesus Christ himself.

On the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the canonization of St. Vincent de Paul, Pope Saint John Paul II quoted the remarks of the famous historian of Christian spirituality, Henri Bremond, regarding Vincent: “It was not love for men that led Vincent to sanctity; rather, it was sanctity that made him truly and effectively charitable; it was not the poor that gave him to God, but, on the contrary, God who gave him to the poor.” God acts in the same way in the lives of all Vincentians. Holiness makes us truly and effectively charitable. It is God who gives us to the poor.

- *The Vincentian Vocation*

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, in discussing the newly founded Society of St. Vincent de Paul, said: “The humanity of our day seems comparable to the traveler of whom the Gospel speaks.... In our turn, weak Samaritans, worldly and people of little faith that we are, let us dare nonetheless to approach this great sick one. Perhaps it will not be frightened of us. Let us try to probe its wounds and pour in oil, soothing its ear with words of consolation and peace.... That is what is proposed to us, the sublime vocation God has given us. Would that we were a little bit worthy of it and bent easily to its burden.” (Letter #90)

It’s not for everyone, nor for just anyone, but being a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul – being a Vincentian – is for some. It is a special calling by God. St. Vincent de Paul said over and over again, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” It was his way of saying, “Imitate Jesus.” Vincent echoed the thought of St. Paul: “Your attitude must be that of Christ” (Phil 2:5). A Vincentian attempts to put on the attitude of Jesus, who “did not come to be served but to serve.” (Mk 10:45)

As members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, we put our faith into action. The Vincentian vocation is the intimate desire to participate personally and directly in helping the needy by person-to-person contact and by the gift of one’s heart and friendship, doing so within the communal spirit of a Conference of lay persons each inspired by the same vocation. Briefly, the Vincentian vocation is the call of personal service to those in need **(Rule: Part I, Article 1.2-1.6)**.

This vocation may be expressed in many ways and with different shades of meaning. Practical translation of faith into action, meditating upon it and adapting it to our changing world, is the very life of every Vincentian, the very life of the Society.

As members of the Society, we seek to bring personally, in a truly brotherly or sisterly and selfless spirit, some moral and material help to all in affliction, whether from destitution, sickness, unemployment, or imprisonment. No difference of religion, nationality, race, or political opinion matters when one is in need. For Vincentians, every person in need is a brother or sister, and an image of the suffering Jesus. “‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison?...’ He will answer them, ‘Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.’” (Mt 25: 44-45)

In an audience with Vincentians, Pope Saint Paul VI praised our ministry as “a great testimony of living Catholicism. You give witness to Christ in the Church of the Poor. The critic from outside is impressed. If he wants to understand you, he must look for that mysterious religious vitality which animates your silent work of love. And those others, too, see you living the Gospel, those to whom you direct your steps, and whom you do not call by the name of the poor, but by that of friend and brother.”

St. Vincent de Paul tells us: “It is our vocation ... to set people’s hearts ablaze, to do what the Son of God did, who came to light a fire on the earth in order to set it aflame with his

love. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him. I must love my neighbor as the image of God and the object of his love ... I must act in such a way that people love their Creator and each other in mutual charity for the love of God who loved them so much that he delivered up his own Son to death for them.”

- ***Loyalty to the Church***

The Church was founded to spread the kingdom of Christ throughout the world and to make all people partakers in the redemption and salvation. All activities of the Society aim at extending the Reign of God, whether these activities relate to the spiritual growth and formation of the individual Vincentian, or to the corporate body of the Society as such, or to the acts of mercy and justice performed in the name of Jesus Christ (**Rule: Part I, Articles 5.1-5.3**).

Members of the Society are distinguished by loyalty to their Christian faith and to the discipline of Catholic life. Vincentians are faithful to the Church and to its leadership. This fidelity manifests itself in the readiness and willingness of the Society to apply itself to any work recommended by members of church leadership which alleviates the needs of those who are poor and suffering. Vincentians always give witness to their faith and to Christ. Pope Saint John Paul II reminded Vincentians that “your association is a constant reminder to the Church of her vocation to show Christ’s preferential love for the poor.”

By tradition, the President-General pays his respects to the Holy Father and reaffirms the Society’s loyalty by letter at the beginning of each New Year. When the poor are in need, the Society responds in loyalty to them. And the Society remains a Christian brotherhood and sisterhood, a family loyal to its members, reaching out to other families.

- ***The Primitive Spirit of the Society***

“Ozanam is no longer with us to remind us of our primitive spirit,” remarked President-General Adolphe Baudon after Frédéric’s death in 1853.

Indeed, from the Society’s earliest days, Frédéric urged fellow members not to establish restrictive or bureaucratic structures, nor to praise ourselves for our accomplishments, which might make us, as he explained to Amélie in an 1841 letter, “more eager to talk than to act... to forget the humble simplicity which has presided over our coming together from the beginning...” (Letter 310)

He urged his friends to imitate the life of our Patron Saint, “as he himself imitated the model of Jesus Christ.” (Letter 175) It is in imitating Christ that we capture the primitive spirit, the spirit that animated the early church. As Frédéric explained, “the faith, the charity of the first centuries ... is not too much for our century.” (Letter 90)

Vincentians seek this primitive spirit by living our Vincentian Virtues, and especially the first three, simplicity, humility, and gentleness, which, St. Vincent explained, come directly from the Gospel teachings, and the life of Christ.

“The first,” he said, “concerns God; the second, ourselves; and the third, our neighbor.” (XII:249)

Vincent often said that simplicity was his favorite virtue. In simplicity, we are dedicated to the truth, because God Himself is truth. In serving the truth, then, we serve both God and the neighbor. In serving the neighbor, Vincent emphasized, “how careful we must be not to appear wily, clever, crafty, and, above all, never to say a word that has a double meaning!” (XII:246)

Our humility reminds us that “all that God gives us is for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.” (Rule: Part I, Article 2.5.1) We act as God’s instruments in serving the neighbor, unconcerned with receiving any credit or reward, because all the glory goes to God.

Finally, we act with gentleness; with a tender love for all of our neighbors, as well as our fellow Vincentians. Gentleness, in our hearts and in our acts, means being kind, being patient, taking no offense when others may return our patience with impatience, our courtesy with rudeness.

This simple, humble, gentleness embodies the primitive spirit of the church and of our Vincentian vocation, as it was in the beginning.

“For God is especially pleased,” Frédéric wrote, “to bless what is little and imperceptible: the tree in its seedling, man in his cradle, good works in the shyness of their beginnings.” (Letter 310)

3.2 VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY

“As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:15-16)

Pope Saint John Paul II told us that “spirituality means a mode or form of life in keeping with Christian demands. Spirituality is ‘life in Christ’ and ‘in the Spirit,’ which is accepted in faith, expressed in love, and inspired by hope.... By spirituality ... we mean not a part of life, but the whole of life guided by the Holy Spirit.” (The Church in America, 29)

The Holy Father also said: “Life according to the Spirit, whose fruit is holiness (cf. Rom 6:22; Gal 5:22), stirs up every baptized person and requires each to follow and imitate Jesus Christ, in embracing the Beatitudes, in listening and meditating on the Word of God, in conscious and active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, in personal prayer, in family or in community, in the hunger and thirst for justice, in the practice of the commandment of love in all circumstances of life and service to the brethren, especially the least, the poor, and the suffering.” (Christifideles laici, 16)

A specific spirituality underpins our Vincentian vocation: Vincentian spirituality, so named for our patron, St. Vincent de Paul. It is his legacy to the Church and to all who pursue his spirit. This spirituality gives life, color, and meaning to who we are and what we do. Vincentian spirituality is the foundation of our vocation, endowing it with credibility, veracity, and integrity. God’s grace strengthens, supports, and energizes the practice of this specific spirituality (**Rule: Part I, Article 2.1**).

The Mystery of the Incarnation

Central to an understanding of Vincentian spirituality is the Mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery and grace that God became human. Every Sunday, we profess our faith in the words of the Nicene creed: "...for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man." In God's unfathomable love for humankind, the Word of God becomes flesh: divinity and humanity meet in a wondrous reality.

St. Vincent de Paul promoted the Mystery of the Incarnation among his followers. He said: "Honor the Incarnation, a mystery beyond words." Vincent taught: "Since Christ willed to be born poor ... he made himself the servant of the poor and shared their poverty. He went so far as to say that he would consider every deed which either helps or harms the poor as done for or against himself."

While St. Vincent de Paul sees the historical Jesus in the persons of the poor and suffering, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam sees the risen, scarred Jesus in them. He based his incarnational spirituality on the 20th Chapter of St. John's Gospel:

Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." (John 20:26-29)

Frédéric wrote: "Both men and the poor we see with eyes of the flesh; they are there and we can put finger and hand in their wounds, and scars of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads; and at this point incredulity no longer has place and we should fall at their feet and say with the Apostle, 'Tu est Dominus et Deus meus.' You are our masters, and we will be your servants." (Letter #137, November 13, 1836).

The Mystery of the Incarnation, so loved by St. Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, is a doctrine not just to be believed but to be put into practice by the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy. Vincentians who minister to the least of their brothers and sisters find in them the person of Jesus, the Incarnated Jesus. And this encounter with Jesus, this interaction, transforms us. Vincentians grow spiritually through their person-to-person service. We do what we do for the person of Jesus, who is, in truth, the flesh-and-blood poor person before us. Every human being is a word of God become flesh.

Vincentians expect God in the unexpected: in unexpected people, times, ways, and places. God wears a human face. When we see Jesus in others and try to be Jesus *for* others, the Mystery of the Incarnation comes alive for us.

Jesus, Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor

Vincentian spirituality can be defined as “a conscious effort to become and act more like the Jesus of Vincent and Frédéric – Jesus seen by them as the *Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor*.” This entails a constant, daily conversion of our vision and our treatment of others, so that we become more like Jesus every day in everything we think, do, and say.

Jesus was the driving force in St. Vincent’s life, the center of his life and activity. Vincent found what he considered the distinctive image of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, where Christ is sent by the Father to preach the Good News to the poor:

Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...” (Luke 4:16-21)

Vincent’s life revolved around this relationship with Jesus as “the Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor.” In his writings, Vincent urged his followers to concentrate on this same image of Jesus, because “Jesus described himself as the Evangelizer of the poor: ‘To preach the good news to the poor he has sent me.’”

Vincent often invoked St. Paul’s concept: “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 13:14) Vincentians are not the center of things, but the ones who center things on the Lord Jesus Christ. For followers of St. Vincent de Paul, spirituality involves a growing relationship with Jesus. Vincent says: “Let us walk with assurance on the royal road on which Jesus Christ will be our guide and leader.” Vincentians strive to grow in intimacy with their Lord and Savior, coming to know what He knows and love as He loves.

In the course of his life and ministry, Vincent came to see that his charism – the gift given him by the Holy Spirit to use for building up the Church – was to preach the good news to the poor and to make the love of God a reality in the lives of the poor. The love Vincent experienced in his relationship with Jesus moved him to do all the great and small things he did during his sixty years as a priest. For Vincent, ministry was a response to God’s grace.

Vincentian spirituality is rooted in the words of Jesus and exemplified in the lives and ministry of St. Vincent de Paul, St. Louise de Marillac, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, and Blessed Rosalie Rendu. Vincentian spirituality was created in the friendship and mutuality of these holy men and holy women who combined their masculine and feminine gifts. Vincentian spirituality is

gentle and strong, nurturing and guiding, loving and creative, compassionate and merciful. Vincentian spirituality is indeed rooted in charity and justice.

Vincentian spirituality is validated in the lives and ministry of the countless men and women who have pursued the spirit and spirituality of Vincent and Frédéric as members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Vincentian spirituality works; it helps make us holy. Men and women who were once active members of the Society and are now canonized and beatified by the Church confirm this, as do the inspiring lives of so many committed members of the Society living today.

Lay Spirituality

Pope Saint John Paul II taught that spirituality concerns the whole of life, or, as he often put it, “the unity of life.” He said to the laity: “There cannot be two parallel lives in your existence as lay men and women: on the one hand, the so-called ‘spiritual’ life, with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called ‘secular’ life, that is, life in a family, at work, social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture. The branch, engrafted to the vine which is Christ, bears its fruit in every sphere of existence and activity. Every activity, every situation, every precise responsibility ... is the occasion ordained by Providence for a ‘continuous exercise of faith, hope, and charity.’” (idem, #59)

By constitution, composition, and administration, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is primarily a lay association. The spirituality proper to it is a lay spirituality, and the Church reminds the laity: “This lay spirituality should take its particular character from the circumstances of one’s state in life (married and family life, celibacy, widowhood), from one’s state of health, and from one’s professional and social activity. All should not cease to develop earnestly the qualities and talents bestowed on them in accord with these conditions of life and should make use of the gifts which they have received from the Holy Spirit.” (*Decree on Apostolate of the Laity*, # 4)

Although Vincentians look to their patron, St. Vincent de Paul, for his teaching and mentoring, for a role model Vincentians look primarily to their founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam: layperson, husband, and father. He is one of us. Frédéric was like us in all things. We can admire and imitate his person, spirit, and spirituality (**Rule: Part I, Article 2.4**). Vincentian spirituality applies to lay persons of varying vocations and professions, social and economic status, and talents and skills. The genius of Vincentian spirituality is that it transcends age, gender, language, culture, color, and generations.

3.3 SACRED SCRIPTURE

Among the various passages from Sacred Scripture that could be considered foundational for Vincentian spirituality, some are exemplary. Vincentian spirituality is grounded in them. St. Vincent quoted scripture in his talks and letters, as did Blessed Frédéric. These passages incarnate the spirit and spirituality of our patron and founder, providing the lay members of the Society clear guidelines and effective means for obtaining our goal: holiness of life.

- **The Preferential Option for the Poor**

“Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matt. 25:31-46)

If Jesus stands at the center of Vincentian spirituality, the poor stand next to him. Jesus’ words, “You will always have the poor with you,” are the reason for Vincentian existence. Vincentian spirituality is horizontal, incarnational, rooted in the enfleshed humanity of Jesus. St. Vincent grounded this teaching in the Gospel according to St. Matthew: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me”. Vincent echoed Jesus when he said, “in serving the poor, we serve Jesus Christ.” And again: “We serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as our being here.” Vincent added that the poor “have been given to us as our lords and masters.”

Without neglecting the needs of others, the Church maintains a preferential option for the poor. Pope Saint John Paul II said: “Taking up the Lord’s mission as her own, the Church proclaims the Gospel to every man and woman, committing herself to their integral salvation. But with special attention, in a true ‘preferential option,’ she turns to those who are in situations of greater weakness, and therefore in greater need. ‘The poor,’ in varied states of affliction, are the oppressed, those on the margin of society, the elderly, the sick, the young, any and all who are considered and treated as the ‘least.’” (*The Consecrated Life*, # 82) The Holy Father also asked this question: “If we recall that Jesus came to ‘preach the good news to the poor’ (Mt 11:5; Lk 7:22), how can we fail to lay greater emphasis on the church’s preferential option for the poor and the outcast?” (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, #51)

Jesus tells us that “the poor you will always have with you,” and this is what he taught and practiced during his public ministry. Indeed, the poor were always with Jesus; his ministry was to heal the sick, comfort the sorrowful, welcome strangers, care for the needy, forgive the sinner, and bring hope to the hopeless.

Blessed Frédéric said: “Sons of Saint Vincent de Paul, let us learn of him to forget ourselves, to devote ourselves to the service of God and the good of all. Let us learn of him that holy preference which shows most love to those who suffer most.” Indeed like the Church, Vincentians are concerned about all of God’s people because all are created in His image and likeness, but Vincentians too have a preferential option for the poor. In this, we imitate our founder and patron.

- **The Good Samaritan**

*“Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?”
He answered, “The one who treated him with mercy.” Jesus said to him,
“Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:29-37)*

Vincentians are weak Samaritans, wounded ourselves, struggling to serve a wounded humanity in the persons of our brothers and sisters – in reality, Christ in disguise. Indeed, Frédéric saw Vincentians not as “good Samaritans,” but as “weak Samaritans.” He wrote: “As weak Samaritans ... let us dare ... to approach this great sick one. Perhaps he will not be frightened of us.” Frédéric thought that wounded humanity would be more receptive, initially, to lay Vincentians than to the clergy. He continued: “Let us try to probe its wounds and pour in oil, soothing its ear with words of consolation and peace; then, when its eyes are opened, we will place it in the hands of those whom God has constituted as the guardians and doctors of souls, who are also, in a way, our innkeepers on our pilgrimage here below....” (Letter, # 90)

Pope Saint John Paul II instructed us: “We are not allowed to ‘pass by on the other side’ indifferently; we must ‘stop’ beside him. Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan. This stopping does not mean curiosity but availability. It is like availability. It is like the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart.... The name ‘Good Samaritan’ fits every individual who is sensitive to the sufferings of others, who ‘is moved’ by the misfortune of another.... This kind of voluntary ‘Good Samaritan’ can be called an apostolate, when it is undertaken for clearly evangelical motives, especially if this is in connection with the Church....” (*On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, #28 and #29)

Frédéric understood the mutuality of ministry. Frédéric discovered that ministry was a two way street: when he ministered to the poor, the poor ministered to him. There was a mutuality of ministry. Frédéric wrote in an article: “Help becomes honorable, because it may become mutual, because every man who gives a kind word, a good advice, a consolation today, may tomorrow stand himself in need of a kind word, an advice, or a consolation; because the hand that you clasp clasps yours in return; because the indigent family whom you love loves you in return, and will have largely acquitted themselves toward you when the old man, the mother, the little children shall have prayed for you.” (October 21, 1848)

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam told the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Florence, Italy shortly before his death in 1853: “How often has it not happened that being weighed down by some interior trouble, uneasy as to my poor state of health, I entered the home of the poor confided to my care; there, face to face with so many miserable poor, who had so much more to complain of, I felt reproached for my depression, I felt better able to bear sorrow, and I gave thanks to that unhappy one, the contemplation of whose sufferings had consoled and fortified me! How could I avoid henceforward loving him the more!”

- **Solidarity**

“You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:25-28)

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam established the Conference of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul to empower its members not simply to work *for* the poor, but to work *with* the poor. Vincentians minister to the poor not merely from a sense of compassion, but from a sense of affinity, of solidarity, with them.

For Vincent and Frédéric, there is only one love. The love of God and the love of neighbor are one and the same. This is the teaching of Jesus: the two loves are ultimately one. The two commandments are inseparable. There is no single commandment greater than these two. Our love is a response to God’s love for us. Since our loving God cannot be seen but must be experienced through loving people, anyone who sees others without loving cannot love or even know God. For Vincent and Frédéric, as for Jesus, love is neither sentiment nor affection nor theory, but a practical willing of another’s best interests and a consequent striving to advance those interests.

Vincent and Frédéric related charity to zeal and fire, echoing Jesus: “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” (Lk 12:49) Frédéric said: “The world has grown cold; it is for us Catholics to rekindle the vital fire which has been extinguished. It is Frédéric wrote that charity “is a fire that dies without being fed, and good works are the food of charity.” (Letter, #82) Vincent said: “If the love of God is a fire, then zeal is its flame; if that love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is that which makes our love of God purer.” (Conf. #211)

As Pope Saint John Paul II observed, “Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue ... it has been possible to identify many points of contact between solidarity and charity, which is the distinguishing mark of Christ’s disciples (cf., Jn 13:35). One’s neighbor is ... the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. One’s neighbor must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person’s sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one’s life for the brethren (cf., 1 Jn 3:16).” (*On Social Concern*, #40)

Pope Saint John Paul II also stated: “Now is the time for a new ‘creativity’ in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by ‘getting close’ to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters.” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, # 50) Vincentians strive to practice solidarity by “getting close” to those they serve in their person-to-person, hands-on acts of charity, especially through home visits. This has been the Vincentian tradition since the foundation of the Society.

- **Charity and Justice**

“I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Every work of Vincent and Frédéric promoted recognition of and respect for the dignity of the poor (**Rule: Part I, Articles 7.1-7.9**). Vincent and Frédéric cherished the virtues of charity and justice in their ministry, because they knew that the poor are sacraments of Christ, outward signs of his presence.

Vincent said: “There is no charity that is not accompanied by justice, nor does it permit us to do more than we reasonably can.” Blessed Frédéric said: “The order of society is based on two virtues: justice and charity. However, justice presupposes a lot of love already, for one needs to love a person a great deal in order to respect his rights that infringe on our rights, and his free-dom that infringes on our freedom. Justice has its limits, whereas charity knows none.”

At Frédéric’s beatification ceremony on August 22, 1997, Pope Saint John Paul II told the world: “Blessed Frédéric observed the real situation of the poor and sought to be more and more effective in helping them in their human development. He understood that charity must lead to efforts to remedy injustice. Charity and justice go together. He had the clear-sighted courage to seek a front-line social and political commitment in a troubled time in the life of his country, for no society can accept indigence as if it were simply a fatality without damaging its honor. So it is that we can see him a precursor of the social doctrine of the Church which Pope Leo XIII would develop some years later in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.”

Like Frédéric, Vincentians know that the love of Christ impels us to the poor, whose rights demand our response.

The poor have the right to daily bread:

Vincentians organize dining facilities. We collect food and distribute necessary provisions for the needy and their families.

The poor have the right to health:

Vincentians organize pharmacies and transport the sick poor to hospitals, clinics, and other medical facilities.

The poor have the right to dignity and hope:

Vincentians practice solidarity through domestic and international Twinning. We help the victims of disasters and provide reverential burial when needed.

The poor in prison have the right to respect:

Vincentians visit the incarcerated to bring them hope, solace, and support; we help the families of inmates as well.

The poor have the right to shelter:

Vincentians welcome strangers and the homeless, and provide temporary shelter. We build and administer housing, providing furnishings and household items.

The poor have the right to care in their old age:

Vincentians pay special attention to the elderly, particularly the lonely and shut-ins. We visit and help persons confined to nursing homes, as well as those who live on their own.

The poor have the right to work:

Vincentians help the unemployed find jobs and offer job training in fields such as computer programming. We tutor them in how to interview and apply for positions, and provide them appropriate clothing.

The poor have the right to education:

Vincentians provide adults and children with tuition and supplemental funding. We provide students with necessary textbooks, school materials, and uniforms.

• **You Will Not Be Judged**

“Be merciful, just as also your Father is merciful. Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven.” (Luke 6:32-37)

St. Vincent advised: “Deal with neighbors in a gentle, humble, and loving manner, even with the most hardened of sinners, and never employ a vehement accusation or reproaches or harsh language toward anyone whomsoever.”

In August 1851, Jean-Jacques Ampère, Blessed Frederic’s closest friend, persuaded him and his wife, Amélie, to take a vacation. They were to see the Great Exhibition at the famous Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London. But Frédéric was not as impressed with the exhibits as he was visibly shocked by the poverty of the poor Irish immigrants who lived in dilapidated tenement houses surrounding the great hall. Frédéric had seen terrible poverty in his lifetime but this wrenched his heart.

Instead of spending all of his time visiting the Great Exhibition and taking in the sights, Frédéric visited the poor Irish with the assistance of the English Vincentians. Frédéric was inspired by these Vincentians. As he recounted in a letter to his brother Charles the English Vincentians needed a lot of virtue and courage to personally help, or even to shake the hands of the shockingly poor, because, in aristocratic England, contact with the poor was thought to “dirty” and compromise a person. Yet our members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul conquered their prejudices. They did much good, and Frédéric considered it a joy to have spent the night in the midst of them.

Vincentians transcend racial and national prejudices. We judge women and men strictly on their need, not on their color, nationality, education, or morality. We treat each person with the dignity that belongs to a human being. That dignity demands, at the very least, that we never judge another person to be useless, unnecessary, or totally bad. To judge and act that way is unjust.

Vincentians are nonjudgmental. A nonjudgmental attitude excludes assigning guilt or responsibility for a person's needs or problems. Vincentians must and do make assessments of the facts, not to determine moral worth but to discern strengths and weaknesses. The people we serve will not reveal their true selves or deeper needs to someone prone to criticize them. When uncertain about the truthfulness of a story, Vincentians give the person telling it the benefit of the doubt. We do not reward deception, but try, by getting to know the person better, to get to the real problems beneath the surface.

- **Prayer**

“This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done...” (Matt. 6:9-13)

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam was a man of prayer. He understood it as the lifeline and foundation for who he was and what he did. Prayer nourished his life and ministry. After Frederic's death, his wife, Amélie, said of him: “I never saw him wake up or fall asleep without making the sign of the cross and praying. In the morning he read the Bible, in Greek, on which he meditated about half an hour. In the last years of his life, he went to Mass every day for his support and consolation. He never did anything serious without praying. Before leaving for his classes, he always got on his knees to ask God for the grace of saying nothing which would attract public praise to himself, but of only speaking for the glory of God and the service of the truth.”

St. Vincent said: “Give me a man of prayer, and he will be able to do all things; he can say with the Apostle, ‘I can do all things in him who strengthens me.’” For Vincent, prayer flows from and leads to action. Separated from ministry, prayer can turn escapist and create illusions of holiness. Separated from prayer, ministry can become superficial and compulsive.

The Eucharist plays a major role in Vincentian spirituality. This is seen in the lives of St. Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frédéric Ozanam. St. Vincent spent one hour each morning before the Blessed Sacrament before celebrating Mass. Vincent visited the Blessed Sacrament before and after his meals, and he would frequently make short visits to the chapel before leaving and upon returning from his responsibilities.

Blessed Frédéric received his First Communion on May 11, 1826 in the Church of Saint-Pierre, Lyon, France; he was thirteen years old. For the rest of his life, Frédéric considered that day a milestone in his spiritual development. From his teens, Frédéric attended Mass daily whenever possible and received Holy Communion frequently – an unusual practice for that time. Not a day went by when Frédéric would not make a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament in one of the churches in Paris as he made his way to an appointment.

Both Vincent and Frédéric discovered what the Church teaches today: the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. It augmented their union with Jesus, strengthened their charity, and committed them to the poor.

- **Trust in Providence**

*“So do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself.”
(Matthew 6:25-34)*

One of the primary characteristics of Vincentian spirituality is belief in and reliance on Divine Providence. For Vincent, nothing — absolutely nothing — in life happened by chance. He found the providence of God in all events and in the people who touched his life. Frédéric saw God’s plan operative everywhere. He trusted that God was providing for him, always acting in his life and in the lives of others. To Amélie, he wrote: “Providence led you into my path, and I offered you the sharing of a life poor, for long and perhaps ever obscure, but sanctified, ennobled by the cultivation of all that is beautiful; I offered you solitude far from all belonging to you, but with the tenderness of a heart which had never belonged to anyone but you.” (Letter, #515)

Blessed Frédéric advised a friend: “Let us walk simply in the path where a merciful Providence leads us, content to see the stone wherever we are to place our foot, without desiring to see the length or the windings of the way.” (Baunard, p. 131)

- **The Sacrament of Marriage**

*“For where two or three are gathered together in my name,
there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:19-20)*

The sacrament of marriage was a powerful means of holiness for Frédéric and Amélie Ozanam, as it is and has been for countless Vincentians. Years before his own wedding, Frédéric displayed his in-depth understanding of the sacrament in a letter to a friend about to be married:

“When two or three are gathered together in my name,” says the Savior, “there am I in the midst of them.” It is in that divine name that you will prepare to unite yourself to a wise and pious wife: the promise will be accomplished in you both.... Love possesses something of the divine nature, which gives itself without diminishing, which shares itself without division, which multiplies itself, which is present in many places at once, and whose intensity is increased in the measure that it gains in extension. In your wife you will first love God, whose admirable and precious work she is, and then humanity.... You will draw comfort from her tenderness on bad days, you will find courage in her example in perilous times, you will be her guardian angel, she will be yours.... You will never be alone again, your virtue will be shared in legitimate hope, the alliance you are about to contract will be an immortal alliance: what God joins together, what he has insisted no man separate, he will not himself separate, and in heaven he will invest with the same glory those who here below were companions in the same exile. (Letter, # 107)

3.4 DEVOTION TO MARY

“O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.”

For Vincentians, authentic Marian spirituality must be nourished from a personal and genuine encounter with Mary in the Gospel, in the spirit of St. Vincent and Blessed Frédéric.

From the establishment of the first Confraternity of Charity at Chatillon-les-Dombes in 1617, Vincent de Paul proposed Mary as the patroness and protector of the work. Vincent suggested Mary as “model”: being obedient to the will of God, modest, discreet, without sin, humble, perfect, full of grace, poor, persevering, and servant of the Lord.



Vincent focused his attention on three events, three mysteries in Mary's life:

- The **Immaculate Conception**
Vincent taught that we must welcome God, be filled with God, clothe ourselves with Christ, and be self-emptying, as Mary the Immaculate one.
- The **Annunciation**
Vincent knew that humility prepared and sustained Mary's offering to God. Mary recognized God as the only Lord and she knew her smallness before God. Like Mary we must give ourselves to God to serve our neighbor, in order to accomplish God's work.
- The **Visitation**
Vincent offered Mary's generosity and compassion in her visit to her cousin Elizabeth as our model of service to the poor.

Frédéric Ozanam had a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, from his youth to his death. He had visited some of the popular Marian shrines in France, Italy, and Spain. He wrote of his spiritual experiences at the shrines of Burgos, Spain and Buglose, France. One of Frédéric's strongest Marian devotions was to Notre Dame de Fourviere in Lyon, France, where he dedicated his youth to God. By Divine Providence, the special day at Fourviere is September 8th, the feast of the Birthday of Mary. Civic leaders and citizens gather annually at the shrine to thank Mary for her intercession in sparing their city from cholera in the 19th century. As the Lyonnais were celebrating Mary's birthday on September 8, 1853, God took Frédéric to heaven in the city of Marseille. Notre Dame de Fourvière welcomed Frédéric home on her special feast and his special day!

Frédéric insisted that the Society take Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception as its patroness. The first members of the Society chose December 8th as their special Marian feast – twenty years before the formal proclamation of the dogma in 1854 by Pope Blessed Pius IX, and a year after Frédéric's death. To this day, Vincentians implore Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, their patroness, to intercede for their Councils and Conferences, and their lives and ministry.

St. Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal

Frédéric's devotion to Mary was especially influenced by the appearance of Mary to Sister Catherine Labouré, a Daughter of Charity in Paris, in 1830, and the events surrounding the “Miraculous Medal.”

In January 1830, Catherine entered the Daughters of Charity in Paris. As a novice, she received the grace of the vision of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal in the Chapel of the Motherhouse:



The First Apparition

The story begins on the night of July 18, 1830: A child (her guardian angel) awakened Sister Catherine Labouré, a novice in the community of the Daughters of Charity in Paris, and summoned her to the chapel. There she met with the Virgin Mary and spoke with her for several hours. During the conversation, Mary said to her, “My child, I am going to give you a mission.”

The Second Apparition

On November 27, 1830, during the evening meditation in the Chapel, Mary once again appeared to Sister Catherine and gave her this mission. First, she saw Mary standing on half a globe, holding a golden globe in her hands as an offering to heaven. On the globe in her hand was the word “France.” Our Lady explained that the globe represented the whole world, but especially France. Times were difficult in France then, particularly for the poor and unemployed, who were often refugees from war. France was first to experience many of the troubles that ultimately reached the rest of the world and remain even today.

The Third Apparition

The vision then changed to show our Lady with arms outstretched with dazzling rays of light still streaming from gems on the rings on Mary’s fingers. Mary explained that the rays symbolize the graces she obtains for those who request them. Some of the gems on the rings were dark, however. Rays and graces did not emanate from these stones, Mary explained, because no one had asked for them. Framing the figure was this inscription:

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.



The Meaning of the Front Side of the Medal:

Mary is standing on a globe, crushing the head of a serpent beneath her foot. She stands upon the globe as the Queen of heaven and earth. Her feet crush the serpent to proclaim Satan and all his followers are helpless before her (Gn. 3:15). The year of 1830 is the year the Blessed Mother gave the design of the medal to St. Catherine Labouré. The prayer to Mary “conceived without sin” supports the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and affirms Mary’s sinlessness, “full of grace” and “blessed among women” (Luke 1:28). The dogma was proclaimed 24 years later in 1854.

The Meaning of the Back Side of the Medal:

The vision turned and showed the design of the reverse side of the medal. Twelve stars encircle a large “M,” from which a cross rises. Below are two hearts with flames arising from them: one encircled in thorns, the other pierced by a sword.

The twelve stars can refer to the Apostles, who represent the entire Church as it surrounds Mary. They also recall the vision of St. John, writer of the Book of Revelation(12:1), in which “a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of 12 stars.” The cross symbolizes Christ and our redemption, with the bar under the cross a sign of the earth. The “M” stands for Mary, and the weaving of her initial with the cross shows Mary’s close involvement with Jesus and our world. In this we see Mary’s part in our salvation and her role as mother of the Church. The two hearts represent the love of Jesus and Mary for us (Lk 2:35).

Then Mary spoke to Catherine: “Have a medal struck upon this model. Those who wear it will receive great graces, especially if they wear it around the neck.” Catherine explained the entire series of apparitions to her confessor, and worked through him to carry out Mary’s instructions.

In 1831, Sr. Catherine was sent to serve the elderly at the Enghien Hospice in the desolate suburb northeast of Paris. She spent the next 46 years there in dedicated and compassionate care of the elderly sick and poor. Sr. Catherine did not reveal that she was the one who had received the vision of the Medal until soon before her death 47 years later. Because of this humility, she is often called the “Saint of Silence.” In 1933, when her body was exhumed for beatification 57 years after her death, it was found “as fresh as the day it was buried.” Her incorrupt body can still be seen today at the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity in Paris, in the very chapel where the Blessed Mother appeared to her. Sr. Catherine Labouré was canonized by Pope Pius XII on July 27, 1947.

The Miraculous Medal

With approval of the Church, the first Medals were cast in 1832 and distributed in Paris. The medal was first known as the medal of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. Almost immediately the blessings that Mary had promised began to shower down on those who wore her Medal. The devotion spread like wildfire. By 1835 over 2 million medals had been distributed, with miracles of grace, health, and peace given to those who prayed in faith and trust. And so, the medal soon became known as the “Miraculous” Medal. In 1836, a Canonical inquiry under-

taken at Paris declared the apparitions to be genuine, and over 15 million medals were dispersed throughout the world in that year alone. Indeed, there is no superstition, nothing magical, connected with the Miraculous Medal. The **Miraculous Medal** is not a “good-luck charm.” Rather, it is a great testimony to faith and the power of trusting prayer. God uses a Medal, not as a sacrament, but as an instrument, in bringing to pass certain marvelous results.

The founding members of the Society were among the first recipients of the medal, and Frédéric carried the Miraculous Medal with him during his whole life. Because of his roots in Italy, Frédéric took a special interest in publicizing the amazing conversion of Alphonse Ratisbonne, through the intercession of Mary and the Miraculous Medal. The publication of the story helped spread devotion to the medal.

The Conversion of Alphonse Ratisbonne

Alphonse Ratisbonne was a Jewish man known for his disdain of Christianity, but he had a good Catholic friend with whom he would discuss issues relating to Catholicism. One day Alphonse and his friend agreed to an “experiment.” Alphonse would wear the Miraculous Medal and pray the Memorare to Our Lady for one week. Believing that nothing would happen, Alphonse accepted the challenge. On January 20, 1842, Alphonse went inside the church of Sant’ Andrea delle Fratte in Rome to wait for his friend, who was attending a funeral there. Alphonse himself described what happened:

When I traversed the Church, I arrived at the spot where they were getting ready for the funeral. Suddenly I felt interiorly disturbed, and saw in front of me something like a veil. It seemed to me that the entire church had been swallowed up in shadow, except in the chapel. It was as though all the light was concentrated in that single place. I looked over towards this chapel whence so much light shone, and above the altar was a living figure, tall, majestic, beautiful, and full of mercy. It was the most holy Virgin Mary, resembling her figure on the Miraculous Medal. At this sight I fell on my knees right where I stood. Unable to look up because of the blinding light, I fixed my glance on her hands, and in them I could read the expression of mercy and pardon. In the presence of the Most Blessed Virgin, even though she did not speak a word to me, I understood the frightful situation I was in, my sins and the beauty of the Catholic faith.

Alphonse Ratisbonne was baptized in 1842, and ordained a priest in 1847.

The Feast of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal is celebrated on November 27th, and the Feast of St. Catherine Labouré on November 28th.

3.5 VINCENTIAN PRAYERS

Canonization Prayer for Blessed Frédéric

O God, Who put the love of the poor into the hearts of Frédéric Ozanam and his companions, and inspired them to found a Society for the relief of the spiritual and corporal miseries of those in want, bless this work of charity and zeal, and should it be in accordance with Your designs that Your pious servant Blessed Frédéric Ozanam should be glorified by the Church, we beseech You to manifest by heavenly favors the power he enjoys in Your sight. Through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

Prayer for the Seriously Ill and the Cause of Ozanam

O God, our Father, You alone have the power to bestow those precious gifts of Yours which we rightly call miracles. If it be Your Will, be pleased to grant such a gift in behalf of those persons for whom the prayers of the Society have been requested and for: _____

(Enter name of seriously ill person for whom you seek divine help.)

We humbly ask that You grant this favor to glorify the Blessed Frédéric Ozanam that it may serve to have him canonized by Our Holy Mother the Church. We make this prayer through Our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son. Amen.

Act of Consecration to the Sacred Heart

Lord Jesus, Who, seeing the cold indifference of the world and in order to revive charity amongst all people, has unveiled before them Your Sacred Heart and revealed the infinite riches of Your Divine Love, behold us prostrate before You, we who form only one Family, by the bond of fraternal charity, scattered, it is true, throughout the world, but united under the standard of St. Vincent de Paul, and forming only one body and one soul in the common spirit of the apostolate of charity; we dedicate and consecrate to Your Divine Person and to Your Sacred Heart this our Council (or Conference), and all the members who compose it, the poor whom we visit in Your name, the youth and children to whom we respond in order to maintain them in Your service; in a word, all those of whom we have the care, and all the works we have undertaken in various places for Your Glory. Quite unworthy though we are, we beseech You to receive this offering in the odor of sweetness; inflame us with that fire which from the depths of Your Heart You desire to see burning more and more each day, in order that, filled with the tenderness of Your Heart, we may learn to despise things here below, to love and help our neighbor, by word and example, and that, among the vicissitudes of this world, we may fix our hearts on the riches and happiness that shall never end. Amen.

(This act of consecration is to be renewed annually by all units of the Society.)

Opening Prayer for Society Meetings:



L: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: **Amen.**

L: Come, Holy Spirit, live within our lives.

All: **And strengthen us by Your Love.**

L: Send forth your spirit and new life will be created.

All: **And the whole face of the earth will be renewed.**

All: **Our Father, Who art in heaven...**

Hail Mary, full of grace...

L: Let us reflect on the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ, recalling His unity and presence among us: "Where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst of them." (Silence)

All: **Lord Jesus, deepen our Vincentian spirit of friendship during this meeting and make us responsive to the Christian calling to seek and find the forgotten, the suffering, or the deprived so that we may bring them your love. Help us to be generous with our time, our possessions, and ourselves in this mission of charity. Perfect in us your love and teach us to share more fully in the Eucharistic Sacrifice offered for all.**

L: Most Sacred Heart of Jesus,

All: **Have mercy on us.**

L: Immaculate Heart of Mary,

All: **Pray for us.**

L: St. Vincent de Paul,

All: **Pray for us.**

L: St. Louise de Marillac,

All: **Pray for us.**

L: Blessed Frédéric Ozanam,

All: **Pray for us.**

L: Blessed Rosalie Rendu,

All: **Pray for us.**

Closing Prayer for Society meetings:



All: Father, grant that we who are nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist may realize the depth of our needs, respond more spontaneously to the suffering of others, and come to love You more deeply by service to our neighbor.

Grant us also the wisdom and strength to persevere when disappointed or distressed. May we never claim that the fruitfulness of our apostolate springs from ourselves alone. United in prayer and action, may we become a visible sign of Christ and may we give witness to His boundless love, which reaches out to all and draws them to love one another in Him.

We thank You, Lord, for the many blessings which we receive from those whom we visit. Help us to love and respect them, to understand their deeper needs, and to share their burdens and joys as true friends in Christ.

L: That the Cause for the Canonization of Frédéric Ozanam, who excelled in the virtue of Christian love, be advanced.

All: Lord, hear us.

L: That our departed friends and relatives, our Vincentian Brothers and Sisters, and those whom we have served, be welcomed into your Kingdom and joined in love.

All: Lord, hear us.

L: In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

CHAPTER 4

Vincentian Saints and Blessed

4.1 SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL (1581-1660)

Vincent de Paul is the patron of the Society that bears his name. In 1885, Pope Leo XIII named Vincent patron of all works of charity, and therefore he is also known as the “Apostle of Charity” and the “Father of the Poor.”

Beginnings

Vincent de Paul was born April 24, 1581 in Pouy, a village of southwest France near the historic city of Dax, in the Landes district of Gascony, not far from the Pyrenees and the northern border of Spain. His birthplace is now known as the village of “Saint Vincent de Paul.”

Vincent was the third child of Jean de Paul and Bertrande de Moras, a peasant couple with six children: four boys and two girls. The de Pauls owned their own farm, but lived simply without many comforts. As a youngster, Vincent worked the fields and shepherded the animals. Shepherds in that area used stilts to move about the marshy land. Vincent never lost his love for the simplicity of country life.

His mother’s character and femininity influenced Vincent greatly. As a child, he saw in her face the sacredness of love. From her, he received inspiration to ground his future work in a radical and passionate love for the poor.

Priesthood

Recognizing his son’s intellectual talents and pleasing personality, and the limited opportunity in their village, Jean de Paul in 1595 enrolled Vincent in a Franciscan boarding school at nearby Dax with the expectation that Vincent would become a priest. To rural people without much hope of advancement, the priesthood was a plausible path to prosperity. In Dax, a lawyer named Comet took an interest in Vincent and hired him to tutor his children, and thus the education of youth became an important part of Vincent’s mission.



Vincent registered at the University of Toulouse. To provide his son's tuition, Mr. de Paul sold a pair of oxen. In 1596, Vincent took the first steps to priesthood: Tonsure and Minor Orders. He was ordained on September 23, 1600, by the old bishop of Perigueux, France. Vincent was scarcely 19 years old, and still a student at Toulouse.

As an ordained priest, Vincent was now in a position to seek a benefice, an ecclesiastical post to which property or a fixed income was attached. He continued his studies, accepting boarding students at his residence to make enough money for his expenses. While tutoring, Vincent pursued a degree in theology, which he received on October 12, 1604. About this time, he inherited a good sum of money. Things were going well.

Settling in Paris, Vincent secured lodging at the royal court with the chaplains of Queen Marguerite, a connection that failed to benefit him financially. Still looking for a golden benefice, he wrote his mother that he remained hopeful of providing for her and the family with a fixed income.

Vincent then suffered a dark night of the soul. After a time, he promised that if God would take away this darkness he would dedicate his life to the service of the poor. Instantly, the anguish left him. It never returned, and Vincent faithfully fulfilled his vow to the poor till the day he died!

Vincent the Parish Priest

Father Pierre de Berulle, famous founder of the French School of Spirituality, became Vincent's spiritual director. De Berulle got Vincent a pastorate at Clichy, outside of Paris. For the first time in the twelve years since ordination, he was able to function as a priest. He took over the parish on May 12, 1612 and was never happier. Again, Vincent took in some boarders, aspirants to the priesthood, one of whom would become his right-hand man when he started his own community of priests and brothers. Vincent was now 32 years old and in the prime of life, but he was still searching for something.

Vincent left the parish of Clichy to assume responsibility for the education and formation of the son of one of the most prestigious families in Europe, the de Gondis. Count Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi was the general of the royal galleys. His wife, Madame Francoise-Marguerite, was a woman of nobility in her own right. She chose Vincent for her spiritual director. Madame de Gondi invited Vincent to accompany her on trips around her vast properties in order to minister to the poor on their lands. During one such journey to the village of Folleville in 1617, Vincent's vow of service to the poor was reinforced when he heard the confession of a dying man. The man told Madame de Gondi that he would have been damned if it had not been for Vincent.

At Madame de Gondi's insistence, Vincent drew up a program for the sacrament of reconciliation with a particular focus on the general confession of one's life. On January 25, 1617, he spoke on the subject to the people of Folleville. Assisted by several priests, he conducted the parish mission and, in the process, discovered his own mission.

His spiritual director, Pierre de Berulle, supported Vincent's wish to leave the de Gondis and suggested that he take over a parish near Lyon, Châtillon-les-Dombes, where he was installed on August 1, 1617. Here Vincent founded the Confraternity of Charity, later called "The Ladies of Charity," gathering the women of the parish into a group to serve the sick and the poor. Vincent himself wrote their first Rule, which was approved by the Vicar General of Lyon on November 24, 1617. The Confraternity of Charity was formally established on December 8th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Vincent's vision and vocation were now transformed and he had surrendered his life to God in service to the poor.

Man with a Mission

In faith Vincent followed Divine Providence "step by step." But the de Gondis wanted Vincent back, and his spiritual director requested that he return to Paris. Ever obedient, Vincent complied. Vincent secured a new spiritual director, André Duval, a professor at the Sorbonne in Paris. He was becoming more engaged in the service of the poor and felt the need to establish institutions to achieve his mission, which he now saw as the continuation of Jesus' own!

Vincent met Francis de Sales and a solid friendship developed. De Sales asked Vincent to become the spiritual father of his Visitation Nuns. Vincent also became spiritual director of the future saint Jane Frances de Chantal, the co-founder of the Visitation. After Francis de Sales' death in 1622, Vincent continued these roles for many years.

Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi entrusted the prison inmates and galley slaves to Vincent. Louis XIII appointed him the general chaplain of the galleys on February 8, 1619. Vincent quickly went to work conducting visits and missions.

Vincent's mind was clear: the poor were his lords and masters. The de Gondis endowed Vincent's work on April 17, 1625 with a large sum of money. The Archbishop of Paris approved Vincent's community of priests and brothers, the Congregation of the Mission (CM), also known as Vincentians, on April 24, 1626. Soon after, Vincent took the first steps for Vatican approval. The purposes of his community were to preach the Gospel to the poor country people and to educate and form good priests. Rome approved the community in 1633.

Expansion of the Vincentian Ministry

In 1625, in the Providence of God, Vincent was sent to serve as spiritual advisor to Louise de Marillac, a widow with a 13-year-old son. As wife, mother, and widow, Louise welcomed the grace of God into her life, allowing her fretful heart to be transformed into a courageous, generous, and compassionate one. She loved intensely, welcoming poor, hopeless, alienated, and abandoned people. In 1629, Vincent sent her to organize, direct, and animate the Confraternities of Charity and the Ladies of Charity. Louise was able to do this because she loved and hoped in God.

On November 29, 1633, following the steps of Providence and under the guidance of St. Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac took a small group of women into her own home to form a community of total dedication: “Given to God for the Service of the Poor.” Thus were the Daughters of Charity founded. Louise trained these Sisters to read, to write, and to serve the poor in health care, social ministry, and education. Above all, she rooted the Daughters of Charity in the Vincentian spirituality of finding Jesus in the poor and the poor in Jesus, teaching them to be contemplatives in action. She taught the Sisters to serve the poor “with respect, mildness, cordiality, and compassion.”

As a priest, Vincent was able to motivate many 17th century women to give their talents and skills in service to the Church, especially for the poor and abandoned. “For the last 800 years or so,” he observed to the Ladies of Charity, “women have had no public employment in the Church ... your sex was deprived of all such employment ... now observe how ... Providence turns to some of you today to supply all that the sick poor ... stand in need of.”

Each year more than 300 children were left on the streets of Paris, many of them sold for a pittance to beggars and deformed by them to further their schemes. In 1638, Vincent built houses to care for these abused and neglected street children, and Louise formed the Daughters of Charity to serve and love these poor orphans.

All these charitable works brought Vincent into the limelight. People of power paid attention to him; politicians sought him out for advice. Bishops and priests came to him for education and formation. Vincent capitalized on his encounters with the powerful to plead for the poor. Louis XIII asked Vincent for a list of those priests that he judged to be the best candidates for the episcopacy. When the Council of Conscience was formed in June 1643, the 62-year-old Vincent was included, at the insistence of Queen Anne of Austria.

Vincent’s ministry kept growing, as did his organizations. His followers buried the dead, cared for refugees and orphans, took care of the sick in their homes and in the hospital, and opened schools for poor children.

The number of beggars increased to more than 100,000 in the city of Paris. In two districts alone, nearly 24,000 families lived in squalor. A hundred persons died daily at Hotel Dieu hospital in Paris. More than 10,000 deaths per month were reported citywide.

Vincent, now 72 years old, met the escalating needs as best he could, always refining his charitable methods and keeping everyone informed by issuing reports on his activities. Vincent organized collections, using wagons to gather donations from merchants. Each week, his followers distributed clothing and thousands of pounds of food in numerous neighborhoods, using rectories as warehouses and distribution centers.

Sickness confined Vincent to his room in July 1660. Nevertheless, he struggled on with his work. His dream, his prayer, was to die not in bed but in battle, fighting for the poor. Early on the morning of September 27, 1660, just days after celebrating 60 years as a priest, Vincent died in his chair. He went home, joining the Eternal Priest, Jesus Christ.

The process of Vincent's beatification officially began in 1705; the ceremonies were conducted in Rome on August 21, 1729. Vincent de Paul was canonized by Pope Clement XII on June 16, 1737.

St. Vincent's Feast Day is celebrated on September 27th.

4.2 SAINT LOUISE DE MARILLAC (1591-1660)

Vincentine spirituality and charism are rooted in the collaboration, mutuality, and friendship of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Louise de Marillac was a wife, mother, widow, teacher, nurse, social worker, and founder. She was an organizer, a radical thinker who lived her life intensely and enthusiastically. Louise was a woman with a deep faith in divine providence and her quest in life was to do the will of God. She knew suffering, but she also knew love. Through this suffering and love, she became a mystic in action.



The Beginning

Louise was born on August 12, 1591, when her father, Louis de Marillac, was a thirty-five-year-old widower. The true identity of her mother remains unknown; most likely, Louise was born out of wedlock and was, in the eyes of the law, illegitimate. Her mother was probably a servant in the de Marillac household, prohibited by social custom from marrying. As an infant, Louise was placed in a Dominican convent-school at Poissy and was never to know the love and security of belonging to a family. But her father genuinely loved Louise and would often visit her. At Poissy, Louise received a solid education in philosophy, theology, Latin, Greek, and literature. She was also immersed in Dominican and mystical spirituality and prayer.

When Louise was twelve years old, her father died and she lost the one person who loved her and to whom she belonged. At this time, she was removed from the convent school at Poissy and placed in a boarding school in Paris, where she received a practical education that included cooking, housekeeping, and sewing. Life was completely different for Louise now.

The religious renewal then occurring in France awakened in Louise a desire to consecrate herself to God. At the age of twenty, she asked permission to enter the cloistered community of the Daughters of the Passion. Afraid that Louise's precarious health would not allow her to endure the austerity of the rule, the superior of the Capuchins refused her request with these prophetic words: "God has other designs on you."

Marriage

On February 5, 1613, Louise married Antoine LeGras, a secretary to the queen, Marie de Medici. Because Louise was illegitimate, the de Marillac family refused to arrange her marriage to someone in the nobility. As Antoine was of the middle class, Louise became Mademoiselle LeGras, instead of Madame. Louise was twenty-two, Antoine thirty-two. Although their marriage had been arranged, as was the custom of the day, true love grew between them. With Antoine, Louise found the joy and warmth of a family home, which was brightened by the birth of a son, Michel Antoine.

Louise loved Michel, through whose infancy she came to know the profound joys of motherhood. Born prematurely, Michel had difficulty developing, and learned slowly. Louise worried about him constantly.

Seven years after their marriage, Antoine's health began to deteriorate, probably due to tuberculosis. He became despondent and angry. Louise loved and cared for her husband, but feared that she was to blame for all of his distress. At a time when divine justice was a major spiritual theme, Louise turned to anxious introspection, became obsessed with her distress, and entered a dark night of the soul. On Pentecost Sunday, May 5, 1623 she received a "Light" of the Holy Spirit that brought her great peace:

"My mind was instantly freed of all doubt. I was advised that a time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and that I would be in a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor, but I did not understand how this would be possible, since there was to be much coming and going."

Because all communities of religious women lived in cloisters at this time, Louise did not understand how women with vows could be serving the poor "coming and going" in the streets of Paris.

For more than two years after her "Light of Pentecost," Louise remained constantly at the side of her dying husband. With a heavy heart, she buried him on December 21, 1625. Grief, loneliness, and feelings of abandonment nearly overwhelmed Louise. She faced her future in fear, deeply worried about how she was to raise Michel, her twelve-year-old son, alone.

Vincent de Paul

At this time, in the Providence of God, Vincent de Paul was sent to Louise to become her spiritual director. In the beginning, Vincent and Louise had scant appreciation for each other, but both strove to be obedient to God's apparent will. In time, Vincent indeed became the guide and mentor of Louise. Ten years her senior, he had made the journey of faith, been tried by many fires, and had his heart burned clean. Vincent listened to Louise and understood her suffering. As he grew to know her, he discovered how much the rejections of her early life and the death of her husband had scarred her. He also discovered in her a great desire to know and to accomplish the will of God. As they became friends, Vincent taught Louise how to trust in God and in herself. Their friendship would revolutionize the religious life of the Catholic Church and its ministry to the poor.

Vincent described to Louise his work among poor people, telling her about the Confraternities of Charity that he had begun in 1617. One principle guided the work of these charities: The poor are Jesus Christ. Vincent insisted that the personal service given to them be compassionate, gentle, respectful, devoted, and heartfelt. These Confraternities of Charity were composed of women in country parishes easing the misery of the sick poor in their homes. Vincent had also organized the Ladies of Charity, a group of wealthy women in Paris, to serve the poor. These women of the nobility contributed generously of their time and money, but would often send their servants to perform the menial tasks.

Louise gradually immersed herself in the work of the Confraternities and the Ladies of Charity. She guided, organized, and animated the Confraternities and rooted the members in the spirituality of their service. Vincent relied heavily on her spirituality, judgment, and organizational ability. Little by little, Louise gained confidence in God and in herself. Her mystic journey continued, and love for God burned quietly in her soul. Deep down, a healing process began to mend her shattered heart, restore her faith, and unlock the creative potential hidden within her. As God led Louise to the poor, charity burned in her heart so that she found and treasured Christ in the broken hearts, spirits, and bodies of the destitute people she served.

The Daughters of Charity

In 1630, while Vincent was preaching a mission, a woman named Marguerite Naseau came to him and asked to help serve the poor. Marguerite was a peasant woman, thirty-two years old, who had taught herself how to read and then gone about the countryside teaching young girls. Sent by Vincent to Louise, she began to work with the Ladies of Charity in Paris. Her example was contagious; soon other young women came to work with Louise, wanting to serve the poor.

Louise knew that these young women required a strong formation, rooted in prayer, to persevere in their service. She also believed that they would find God in the poor and the poor in God by faith alone. And she recognized that they would need mutual support and encouragement, a community to belong to, so that they could dedicate themselves to the service of poor, abandoned, orphaned, sick, and illiterate people.

On November 29, 1633, after years of praying and discerning with Vincent, Louise welcomed into her home several young women who expressed their love of God and a desire to live in community to serve the poor. In the providence of God, the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born. Louise began to see her “Light of Pentecost” become a reality as Vincent explained the vocation of the Daughter of Charity:

“You will have for a convent the houses of the sick; for a cell a hired room; for a chapel your parish church; for cloister the streets of the city; for enclosure, obedience ... for a grille, the fear of God; for veil, holy modesty; making no other form of profession to assure your vocation than the continual confidence you have in divine providence and the offering you make to God of all that you are and your service in the person of the poor.”

The mission of her Daughters of Charity was to the sick poor in their homes, to foundlings (orphans), to the sick in hospitals, to young children in schools, to prisoners, to the mentally ill, and to the elderly. As their collaboration increased, Louise and Vincent discovered and developed their complementarity, combining daring initiative with prudent planning and constancy. Vincent provided the original vision of service to the poor, a vision shaped by the love of Jesus Christ. Louise helped transform that vision into reality.

Finally, in 1650, Louise found peace with her son, Michel, when he married and settled down. She then enjoyed the happiness of grandmotherhood when Louise-Renee was born.

The End

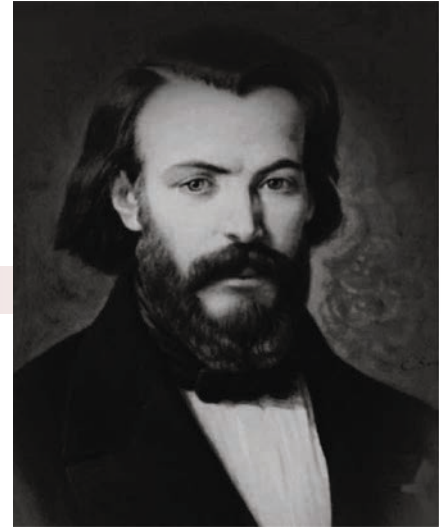
Louise died on March 15, 1660. Her final words to her Daughters echoes down through the centuries: “Take good care of the poor.” Her motto for them still resonates: “The Charity of Christ crucified urges us.” Louise knew it was the love of Christ that urged her, and her Daughters, to go to the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the imprisoned, the uneducated, and the underprivileged. The Daughters of Charity continue her legacy of charity, by serving wherever poor people need their help.

Louise de Marillac was beatified by Pope Benedict XV on May 9, 1920 and canonized by Pope Pius XI on March 11, 1934. Pope John XXIII named Louise the Patron of all Christian Social Workers on February 10, 1960.

St. Louise's Feast Day is celebrated on May 9th.

4.3 BLESSED FRÉDÉRIC OZANAM (1813-1853)

Recognized as the prime founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Blessed Frédéric was that rare individual who exhibits both intellectual genius and extraordinary holiness. Husband and father, professor and researcher, journalist and author, apologist and defender of the faith, he was, above all, a Good Samaritan.



Beginnings

Antoine Frédéric Ozanam was born on April 23, 1813 in Milan, Italy, to which his father and mother had temporarily relocated. From the region of Lyon, France, Jean Antoine François Ozanam and Marie Nantas were devout Catholics who handed on to Frédéric from his childhood a deep love of God and the poor. They taught him to seek Christ in those who bore the burden of human suffering and social injustice.

Frédéric enjoyed a happy childhood. Not surprisingly, however, his first contact with philosophy challenged his sharp intelligence and filled him with uncertainty. At the height of this crisis of faith, Frédéric promised that if God took away the darkness he would give his life to the service of truth. Instantly, his doubts against faith ended. Frédéric fulfilled his vow faithfully until the day he died. His mentor, Fr. Joseph Mathias Noirod, later helped Frédéric in the explication of philosophy, strengthening him in the faith he so loved.

City of Paris

When Frédéric graduated from secondary school at the Royal College of Lyon, he moved to Paris to study law, as his father wished. There, he was confronted with a society in deep turmoil. The French Revolution had left its ugly, lasting mark. At first, Paris displeased Frédéric. He wrote on December 18, 1831 that there was no life, no faith, no love to be found in the city. Frédéric perceived Paris as a dead body to which he, a youth full of energy, was tied. Its coldness chilled him, and its corruption was killing him!

In God's Providence, Frédéric met the famous Andre-Marie Ampère, who would become a second father to him. Ampère opened his heart and hearth to Frédéric, helping him to overcome loneliness and homesickness. He began to see Paris in a different light, coming to an unshakable certitude: Christianity is the only remedy to heal the evils of today's society; its scientific and historical truth must be demonstrated.

While in Lyon, before he had reached his 18th birthday, Frédéric had begun work on a vast tome entitled: *Demonstration of Truth and of the Catholic Religion by the Antiquity of Historical, Religious, and Moral Beliefs*. The title would undergo various changes, but the student and, later, the professor would eventually fulfill his youthful dream!

Pursuit of Truth and Social Justice

In Paris, Frédéric often worked fifteen hours a day, learning foreign languages and studying religions other than Catholicism. He gathered around him students of like mind and faith and confronted the faculty members of the Sorbonne who attacked their beliefs. Frédéric and several friends approached the Archbishop of Paris, Hyacinthe Louis de Quelen, imploring him to let Father Henri Lacordaire deliver a series of conferences in Notre Dame Cathedral. The purpose was to nourish and deepen the faith of the countless students who were hearing more falsehood than truth. Frédéric persisted until the archbishop consented. Success was overwhelming, and the “Conferences of Notre Dame” were launched!

Gifted with intuition, sensitivity, and tact, Frédéric, from his childhood, was affected by the harsh, unfair conditions of the lower social classes. Nineteen years before the abolition of slavery in the French colonies and overseas territories, promulgated on April 27, 1848, the barely sixteen-year-old Frédéric vigorously denounced the inhumanity of servitude! Later, still twelve years before Karl Marx’s 1848 manifesto, Frédéric deplored the widening gulf between the powerful and the weak, prophesying against the coming clash between them. Frédéric wrote that what divides people are not political structures but social issues.

These ideas were promoted in the *Tribune Catholique*, a newspaper founded in January 1832 by Emmanuel Bailly. To the newspaper was linked a literary circle, “The Society of Good Studies,” whose aim was to develop, among Catholics, a taste for historical, philosophical, and religious research. This society, later known as “The Conference of History,” fulfilled Frédéric’s dream of “a gathering of friends working together for the advance of learning” in the light of Christian thought. He and his companions became active members and developed it into a forum of great discussion and research.

One Saturday morning, Frédéric and his friends were confronted by a fellow student advocating the ideas of the “Saint-Simonians” and found it difficult to answer his challenge: “What is your Church doing today to meet the needs of society?” Frédéric and his companions knew that they must concretize their faith in action, that they must evangelize like the apostles: not only by words, but by the constant practice of charity. Frédéric rallied them with this exhortation: “The blessing of the poor is that of God ... let us go to the poor.”

Birth of the Society

On April 23, 1833, his twentieth birthday, Frédéric and five other students met with their mentor, Emmanuel Bailly, in the office of The Catholic Tribune. There they established the “Conference of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul,” soon to be called “The Society of St. Vincent de Paul,” and elected Bailly as their first president. Resolved to respond to Christ’s call by dedicating themselves to the poor after the example of St. Vincent de Paul, they asked Sister Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, for the names and addresses of several families in need. Sr. Rosalie, known as “The Mother of the Poor” in the Mouffetard Quarter of Paris, taught Frédéric much about the poor and how to minister to them with love and respect. The first members of the Society were determined to bring not only bread but friendship to the poor.

Frédéric was beginning to make a name for himself professionally. Acquiring a doctorate in law in 1836, he assumed a barrister's career, and then became professor of commercial law in Lyon. In 1839, he received his doctorate in literature. He came in first in the competitive examination of the Faculty of Arts and Literature at the Sorbonne. Frédéric became Assistant to Professor Claude Fauriel in 1841 and succeeded him in 1844 as Professor of Foreign Literature.

The Love of His Life

Frédéric met Amélie Soulacroix and the two fell in love and were married, at Saint Nizier Church in Lyon on June 23, 1841. Frédéric's brother Alphonse, the priest, witnessed the sacrament; brother Charles, the medical doctor, served. The Ozanams' daughter, Marie, was born on July 24, 1845 and she was the apple of her father's eye. Frédéric spent hours teaching her. His life was now devoted to family, teaching, research, writing, and various civic, social, and religious commitments.



Frédéric had a passion for scholarship and published several outstanding works reflecting his reserved emotion and apostolic fire: "Thesison Dante," "Franciscan Poets," and "Germanic Studies." He was also a remarkable teacher, imbued with a deep sense of duty. Rooted in faith and trust in God, this frail man, loving father, attentive husband, prodigious writer, and teacher was able to fulfill his many heavy responsibilities while being fully devoted to the Society he founded.

His best friend, Jean-Jacques Ampère, painted a vibrant picture of Frédéric as a professor whose dedication to his students knew no limits. "It is rather unusual," he emphasized, "to find at the same level the two strengths a professor should have: form and substance, knowledge and eloquence."

Hersart de Villemarqué embellished Ampère's tribute: "God alone knows the immense good that Ozanam brought through his lectures, which costs him so much wear and tear. He knew how to inspire this youthful audience, which listened to him, with determination in work, resoluteness, useful tasks, fine vocations! He was cheered passionately; he was loved even more. When he would leave the faculty, everyone rushed to have a word with him, to hear him again; they escorted him along the paths in the Luxembourg Gardens which he crossed on his way home. He was exhausted but often brought home with him the joys he prized above the most enthusiastic applause."

Although he was tough toward the intolerant, those who considered themselves the exclusive champions of truth, and did not hesitate to put such people down, Frédéric had tremendous respect for the opinions of others, even those contrary to his own. "Let us learn to stand up for our convictions without hating our opponents," he urged, "to love those who think differently from ourselves." Persuasion was his method for winning people over. "If anything consoles me on leaving this earth before having done what I would have liked," he observed near the end of his life, "it is that I have never worked for men's praise, but in the service of truth."

The Society and Social Justice

Frédéric's influence continued to expand beyond the Sorbonne. Through the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, he came into contact with the world of workers and the real sufferings of the working classes. Frédéric studied the problem with typical precision and conscientiousness. This excerpt from his correspondence of November 1836 to February 1848 reveals his mind: "I request that we take care of the people who have too many needs and not enough rights, who rightly claim a greater share in public affairs, guarantees for work and against poverty."

Frédéric was one of the first Catholics of the 19th century to formulate the idea of a "natural salary" that would provide compensation against unemployment and accidents and guarantee pensions to workers. A number of Frédéric's ideas can be discerned in Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

Although an intellectual, Frédéric was also a man of action. He wanted to set up a true Christian democracy in harmony with the principles of justice and charity. For this, he relied on the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Frédéric was convinced that personal contact with and direct service to the needy were the Society's main responsibilities, and that its ultimate objective was the spiritual, moral, and human development of each individual.

The End

The progression of his chronic kidney disease took its toll, forcing Frédéric to rest. In 1852, he and Amélie went to Italy, but his condition continued to deteriorate. Although he felt the attraction of eternity, the thought of leaving his loved ones cast a pall over him. In Pisa, on his fortieth birthday, April 23, 1853, four and a half months before his death, he abandoned himself to the will of God. Close to death, Frédéric insisted on returning to France. Leaving Italy, he cried out: "My God, I thank you for the sufferings and the afflictions you have sent me in this house."

On August 31, 1853, they boarded the steamship "Industrie" at the port of Livorno, landing September 2nd at Marseille, where Amélie's relatives and members of the Society greeted them. Although terribly weak, he was happy to be back in his own country. Frédéric was too weak to go on to Paris, so Amélie and the family rented a residence.

On September 8, 1853, the feast of the Birthday of the Blessed Mother, to whom he had such a great devotion, Frédéric breathed his last. His parting words were: "Oh Lord, Oh Lord, have mercy on me." He is buried in the crypt of the Church of St. Joseph-des-Carmes at the Catholic Institute of Paris, surrounded by the young students of the university to whom he had given so much of himself.

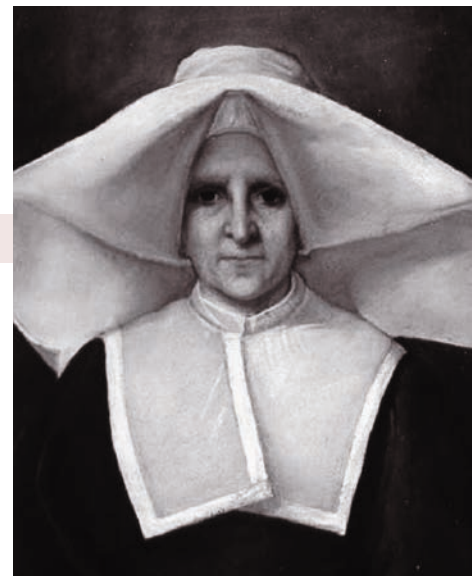
The Beatification

The cause for the beatification of Frédéric Ozanam was begun on March 15, 1925, the Feast of St. Louise de Marillac, in the Archdiocese of Paris, and in Rome on January 12, 1954. By his decree of July 6, 1993, Pope Saint John Paul II proclaimed Frédéric “Venerable” on the heroicity of his virtues. Three years later, June 25, 1996, the Holy Father signed a decree recognizing the miracle obtained through the intercession of Frédéric in favor of an eighteen-month-old Brazilian boy suffering from diphtheria. The miraculously healed Fernando Luiz Benedicto Ottoni is the grandson of a Vincentian who gathered fellow Vincentians to pray for him. Pope Saint John Paul II beatified Antoine Frédéric Ozanam in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on Friday morning, August 22, 1997, during World Youth Day.

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam’s Feast Day is celebrated on September 9th.

4.4 BLESSED ROSALIE RENDU (1786-1856)

Sister Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, is recognized as a co-founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. She mentored the founding members of the Society in the spirit and heritage of St. Vincent and St. Louise.



Beginnings

Jeanne-Marie Rendu was born in 1786 in the village of Comfort in Gex, France. She was the oldest of four girls. Her simple, faith-filled parents were small property owners who enjoyed a certain affluence and true respect throughout the area.

Jeanne-Marie was three years old when France suffered first from Revolution and then from the Napoleonic Wars, which caused much oppression and upheaval in the country. From 1790 it was compulsory for the clergy to take a civil oath of support for the government. Numerous priests, faithful to the Church, refused to take this oath. Some were put to death; others hid to escape capture. With deep faith and trust in God, the Rendu family faced grave danger by becoming a refuge for these priests. Thus, the Bishop of Annecy took refuge in the Rendu household and became “Peter, the Gardener,” Jeanne-Marie’s friend. In this atmosphere of solid faith, Jeanne Marie was formed, making her first Communion one night by candlelight in the basement of her home. From childhood, Jeanne-Marie learned concern for others from her parent’s example.

A Daughter of Charity

Jeanne-Marie attended boarding school under the Ursulines and worked in the hospital of Gex. There in the hospital, she saw a portrait of St. Vincent de Paul and, although not quite 16, felt called to become a Daughter of Charity. On May 25, 1802, Jeanne-Marie Rendu began her life as a Daughter of Charity in Paris.

After a period of formation, Jeanne Marie received the name of Sister Rosalie and was sent to the house of the Daughters of Charity in the Mouffetard district to begin her service to the poor. This area was the most impoverished district of Paris, with poverty in all its forms: psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual. Disease, unhealthy slums, and destitution were the daily lot of the people trying to survive there. Sr. Rosalie would remain here for 45 years.

The Mouffetard district was indeed one of the poorest of Paris: it had the most beggars in the streets, the most workers out of work, and the poorest lodgings; two-thirds of the population lacked firewood in the winter. Sister Rosalie untiringly cared for, fed, visited, consoled, and comforted the poor and destitute. She would often say, “There is something that is choking me and takes away my appetite ... the thought that so many families lack bread,” and her feminine intuition would then suggest a solution. For the service of the poor, she dared to undertake everything with intelligence and boldness. Nothing would stop her.

Every day, in all kinds of weather, Sister Rosalie crisscrossed the streets and alleyways of the Mouffetard district, her rosary in her hand and a heavy basket of bread on her arm, walking with her God. She would speak to God of the families she was going to visit, praying for the relief of their sufferings. “Never,” she observed, “have I prayed so well as in the streets.” Daily she lived the words that St. Vincent de Paul spoke to the first Daughters of Charity: “You will go and visit the poor ten times a day, and ten times a day you will find God there!”

One of her Sisters affirmed the intensity of Rosalie’s prayer life, noting that “she continually lived in the presence of God. She had a difficult mission to fulfill and we were always assured of seeing her go to the chapel or finding her on her knees in her office.”

Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Emmanuel Bailly, the eventual president of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, sent Frédéric Ozanam and Auguste Le Taillandier to Sr. Rosalie for guidance in their work of charity. She taught them to see Christ in his poor and to approach each with humility as Christ’s servants. To Frédéric and the founding members of the Society, Sister Rosalie said:

“God has already given you spiritual wisdom, or you would not be sacrificing your precious free day to his poor. Because you see Christ in his poor, I know you will approach each one you visit with humility, as his servant. Always remember, *messieurs*, that if we had lived through the hardships they have had to meet — if our childhood had been one of constant want — perhaps we, too, would have given way to envy and hatred as, I must admit, have many of the poor in this quarter. Be kind, and love, for love is your first gift you give to the poor. They will appreciate your kindness and your love more than all else you can bring them.”

Sr. Rosalie referred to the office where she received the poor as her “parlor.” Here she received the first members of the Society, advising them with these words: “If you wish to be loved, you must love, and if you have nothing to give, give yourself.” It was not far from the Mouffetard district to the Latin Quarter, and so young people from all the schools, aspiring to all sorts of careers, could be seen in her office — students of law, medicine, education, and engineering, coming to serve the poor. Tenderly and respectfully, Sister Rosalie would accompany them, show concern for them, support them, and create a link between them and the families they visited, asking of each one what they could give to the service of the poor: to one, their pen; to another, their service; to another, their words; and to each, a few moments of their time.

Sr. Rosalie always recommended patience, mercy, and courtesy. “Love the poor, do not blame them too much ... remember that the poor are even more sensitive to your behavior than to help.” She taught Frédéric and the first members of the Society how to make home visits and how to see Jesus in the poor. She gave them families to visit and advice on the Vincentian way to go to them: with respect and compassion.

It can be said of Sr. Rosalie that she had the “gift of humanness.” She was close to the poor, understood them, and loved them with her heart and with her faith; therein lay her secret. Moreover, to fight against injustice and poverty, she awakened the consciences of the powerful and the affluent. She was, indeed, a friend of the poor and the rich. “There are many ways of providing charity,” she would comment; “the assistance of money or assistance in kind that we give to the poor will not last long. We must aspire to a more complete and longer lasting benefit: study their abilities, their level of education, and try to get them jobs to help them out of their difficulties.”

During the Revolution of 1830, particularly the last days of July, Sr. Rosalie focused her attention on those who had suffered most from the revolt, collecting the wounded from both sides and nursing them back to health. Without any fear, she risked her life in these confrontations. Her courage commanded admiration.

During the Revolution of 1848, when Archbishop Denis Auguste Affre was mortally wounded on the barricade on July 25th, Sr. Rosalie made her way through the crowds, mounted the barricade, looked into the sea of faces racked with hatred, and cried out: “Stop this shooting! Haven’t I enough widows and orphans to care for now?” Her words had the desired effect, and peace was restored. In 1852, the French government presented the Cross of the Legion of Honor to “the Mother of the Poor,” Sr. Rosalie.

The destinies of Sr. Rosalie Rendu and Frédéric Ozanam mingled in the love of the poor, forging lasting bonds between the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Daughters of Charity. In his book *Frédéric Ozanam*, M.A. Hess affirms this intertwining: “It is scarcely imaginable to retrace the life and work of Frédéric Ozanam without evoking the memory of Sister Rosalie, inasmuch as their collaboration was close in the service of the poor.... The providential convergence of these two destinies has marked the history of charity in the nineteenth century.”

The End

Despite fragile health, Sister Rosalie never rested, always managing to overcome fatigue and fevers. But age, empathy, and overwork eventually undermined her strong resistance and weakened her health. During her last two years of life, she suffered from increasing blindness.

Sr. Rosalie died on February 7, 1856. A huge crowd of approximately 50,000 people, from every rank of society, flocked to her funeral. They came to show respect for her works and love for their “mother.” Both the well-off and the needy requested that she be buried in the cemetery of Montparnasse in Paris. The inscription on her tombstone reads: “To our good mother Rosalie, from her grateful friends, the poor and the rich.” To this day, flowers and prayers are brought to her gravesite, in an ongoing homage to this humble Daughter of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac.

Beatification

On April 24, 2001, the Vatican recognized Sr. Rosalie’s heroic practice of virtue. The “Apostle of the Mouffetard Quarter” of Paris was given the title of Venerable. A theologian summed her up as “an outstanding woman; she was sensitive, dynamic, strong, warmhearted, tender, discreet, of good character and had a good sense of humor.”

Sr. Rosalie Rendu was beatified in Rome on November 9, 2003 by Pope Saint John Paul II. All Vincentians celebrate this beautiful model of love for the poor and co-founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Blessed Rosalie Rendu’s Feast Day is celebrated on February 7th.

4.5 VINCENTIAN SAINTS, BLESSED AND VENERABLE

Vincentian spirituality works. It accomplishes its purpose: personal holiness. Vincentian spirituality depends, first and foremost, on God’s grace and, second, on cooperation with that grace. It is a practical, hands-on, person-to-person spirituality patterned after the Society’s founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, and its patron, St. Vincent de Paul. Vincentian spirituality exemplifies the Good Samaritan. Since the foundation of the Society in 1833, thousands upon thousands of men and women throughout the world have become holy through the practice of Vincentian spirituality. Some of these persons have been recognized by the Church and raised to the altar. More will be so honored in the future. The Vincentian Family of St. Vincent de Paul includes a large number of *saints*, *blessed*, and *venerable*, but our focus here is on those men and women who were active members in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Saint Gianna Beretta Molla (1922-1962)

Feast: April 28th

Gianna Beretta was born in Magenta (Milan), Italy, on October 4, 1922, the tenth of thirteen children. She was raised in a devout family, with parents who demonstrated deep faith and a generous spirit of charity. Third Order Franciscans, her father and mother consecrated their family to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Gianna inherited her parents' attraction to prayer and compassion for the poor.

Gianna began primary school in 1928 and secondary school in 1933. She had little interest in academics, preferring art, music, and painting. With a love for the outdoors and a lively family life, she was a happy, smiling girl, though quiet. Gianna visited the Blessed Sacrament daily and always carried a rosary with her.



In 1937, the Beretta family moved so that the older children could attend the University of Genoa. Gianna became an active member of Catholic Action in her parish. In 1942, both parents died. That same year, Gianna was admitted to the School of Medicine at the University of Milan. In her fourth year, she transferred to the University of Pavia, where she obtained her degree in medicine and surgery in March 1950.

During medical school, Gianna became an active member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Thinking that she might have a vocation to the religious life, she made a pilgrimage to Lourdes, seeking discernment. Upon her return, she met and fell in love with Pietro Molla. Taking this as an answer to her prayers, she married Pietro on September 24, 1955; her brother Giuseppe, a priest, witnessed the marriage.

Gianna successfully blended her profession, ministry, and family life. With her brother Ferdinando, also a physician, she opened a clinic in a small town of two thousand people several miles from the family home. She was especially generous to the poor, providing medicine and money for those in need.

Gianna and Pietro had three children. Each pregnancy was a risk because of her fragile health. Their son, Pierluigi, was born in 1956, Maria Zita in 1957, and Laura Enrica Maria in 1959. After a number of miscarriages, Gianna again became pregnant. Toward the end of the second month of this pregnancy, she began to experience pain. Her doctor diagnosed a fibrous tumor in the ovary. Gianna knew the risk she was running, but kept the suffering to herself.

On the way to the hospital on April 20, 1962, Gianna told her husband, Pietro: "If they should ask which of the two lives they should save, do not hesitate – first, the life of the child." On April 21st, Gianna Emanuela was delivered by Caesarean section. Septic peritonitis set in and Gianna suffered greatly, but she refused powerful drugs and insisted on dying at home. On April 29th, she passed away.

For three days, an endless procession of admirers passed her coffin. People spoke of her sacrifices and great compassion. The Archbishop of Milan opened the cause for her beatification in 1972 and Pope Saint John Paul II beatified her on April 24, 1994 in the presence of her husband and four children. At the ceremony, her son, Pierluigi, said:

“My mother knew how to live her earthly, daily existence with simplicity, balance, and constant service, all in a beautiful harmony, first as a young student and professional person, as a woman, then as wife and mother. Her generous commitment to and involvement in Catholic Action and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, along with her *joie de vivre*, was crowned with her love of piano, painting, tennis, mountain climbing, skiing, the symphony, theatre, and traveling.”

St. Gianna was canonized by Pope Saint John Paul II on May 16, 2004. Called a “mother-martyr for the love of God and in obedience to his commandment,” Gianna has much to teach Vincentians.

St. Richard Pampuri (1897-1930) Feast: May 1st

Richard Pampuri stands as a symbol of generosity of heart. He was born Erminio Filippo Pampuri in Trivolizi, Italy on August 2, 1897, the tenth child of a well-to-do and pious family. His mother died when he was three, and Richard was sent to Torino to live with his grandfather and an aunt. His uncle, Carlo, a lover of the medical profession, instilled in him a deep love of serving the sick.



In 1907, Richard’s father was killed in an accident. Richard survived the tragedy through the love and kindness of his family. Having seriously considered the foreign missions, he decided on medical school instead. His sister entered the convent, and he became a Franciscan tertiary.

Richard took part in Catholic associations when anticlericalism was rampant in Italy. Drafted into the military, he served in the medical corps in World War I and was decorated for bravery. In 1918, Richard returned to his studies, graduating in medicine and surgery on July 6, 1921. He completed his internship the next year and in 1923 registered at Pavia University as a general practitioner and surgeon.

As a student, Richard became very active in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and other service organizations. He wrote to his sister, the religious: “Pray that pride, selfishness, and any other evil passion will not prevent me from always seeing the suffering of Christ in my patients, treating him and comforting him.” This is certainly the core of Vincentian spirituality!

Richard moved to Milan and founded the “Band of Pius X,” a group dedicated to medical care for the poor. He also raised funds to provide food and clothing for the needy. Discerning a vocation to the religious life, he joined the Hospitaller Order of St. John of God. On October 28, 1928, Richard took vows in the community and was assigned to a clinic in Brescia, where

he continued to serve the poor. The severe lung disease he suffered from worsened. Moved to his community's hospital in Milan, he developed pneumonia and prophesied when he would die: on May 1, 1930 at the age of 33.

Many healings took place at his tomb and his cause for canonization proceeded quickly. Richard was beatified in 1981, and Pope Saint John Paul II canonized him on November 1, 1989, observing of Richard that he was "close to our times, but even closer to our problems and our sensibilities." In Richard, Vincentians have another saint to act as intercessor, another young person of great example in witnessing love for the poor.

Blessed Francis Faa di Bruno (1825 – 1888) Feast: March 27th

Francis was born in Alessandria, Italy on March 29, 1825, the youngest of twelve children. At the age of sixteen, he enlisted in the military of Piedmont and reached the rank of captain. Assigned to Paris in 1849, Francis earned a doctorate in mathematics and astronomy at the Sorbonne. There he joined the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and became an active member. Since Blessed Frédéric Ozanam taught at the Sorbonne through April 1852, Francis may actually have known him.



Resigning his military commission to pursue his academic interests, Francis became one of the leading mathematicians and astronomers of his time. He moved to Italy to assume a professorship at the University of Turin. Francis wrote more than forty articles for American and European publications. His writings are included in the Catalogue of Scientific Papers of the Royal Society in London. Francis also wrote ascetical studies and sacred melodies and invented scientific apparatuses.

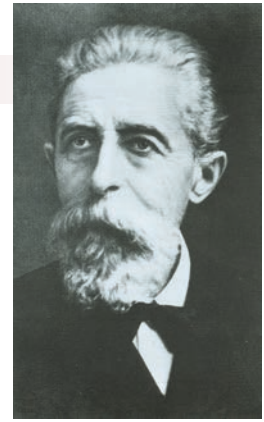
In Turin, Francis, a dedicated lay person, focused on charitable works and showed special concern for the well-being and safety of women and young girls, establishing schools, retirement homes, and other charitable institutions. In 1868, he founded the Sisters of Our Lady of Suffrage and the Society of Saint Zita to help in his ministry. The Society of Saint Zita especially addressed the needs of domestic workers. Francis studied for the priesthood in Turin and was ordained in 1876 at the age of fifty-one. He died in Turin on March 27, 1888.

Pope Saint John Paul II beatified Francis on September 25, 1988, calling him "a prophet in the midst of the people of God" and "a giant of faith and charity," and praising him for knowing how "to find positive responses to the needs of his time." Blessed Francis gives Vincentians much to think about in their ministry.

Blessed Giuseppe Toniolo (1845-1918) Feast: October 7th

Blessed Giuseppe Toniolo is the first economist beatified in the Catholic Church. As an advisor to Pope Leo XIII in the writing of *Rerum Novarum*, he helped to directly link the writings of Frédéric Ozanam to the social teachings of the Catholic Church.

Born in the Italian city of Treviso on March 7, 1845, Toniolo grew up the oldest of four children in a middle-class family in the region surrounding Venice.



Like Blessed Frédéric, Toniolo completed a law degree before becoming a university professor in another discipline, was a married layperson and father, and was an active member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. After earning degrees in civil and canon law, Bl. Giuseppe remained at the University of Padua, studying political economy, and serving there as a professor of economics for two years. After teaching briefly at the University of Modena and the University of Venice, he became a professor of economics, and later the department chair, at the University of Pisa from 1883 until his death in 1918.

On September 4, 1878, he married Maria Schiratti. They had seven children, four of whom lived to adulthood, and he is credited as a founder of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan.

Coming of age in the late nineteenth century, Toniolo witnessed the great expansion of urban poverty and the exploitation of workers resulting from a laissez-faire approach to the Industrial Revolution. Like Frédéric before him, he advocated labor unions while rejecting the Marxist and Socialist vision of class warfare, preferring a Catholic vision, in which capital and labor alike fulfill their responsibilities of justice towards one another.

In Toniolo's view, both the egoism of laissez-faire and the state idolatry of socialism were ultimately materialist visions which stood in the way of the Church's moral teachings. He urged instead "a civil order in which all social, legal, and economic forces, within the fullness of hierarchical development, cooperate proportionally to the common good, on the basis of liberty, fraternity, and justice, with the intention of promoting the social role of everyone, and in the last instance benefiting especially the poor."

Representing neither the left nor the right in politics or economics, Toniolo's vision depended on keeping decisions as local as possible – to communities, businesses, unions and other associations, and families. This principle, called "corporatism" in Toniolo's time, is embodied in the Church's teachings as "subsidiarity." He argued strongly against socialism in his Program of Milan in 1894, instead championing a form of Christian Democracy.

In 1889 he founded the Catholic Union for Social Studies and was a leader in the Catholic social action movement in the early twentieth century. It was the responsibility, he believed of Christians to be involved in the economy; that in fact "The economy is an integral part of the operative design of God, to the extent that, understood properly, participation in it ought to be considered a religious obligation of justice and charity to one's neighbor and to one's self.

In this, he elevated the concept of solidarity, of our obligation to the common good as a guiding principle in economic affairs. As Pope Benedict XVI said of him, “Bl. Toniolo points out the way of the primacy of the human person and of solidarity.”

Giuseppe Toniolo died October 7, 1918, at the age of 73. The cause for his canonization was opened in 1951, and he was beatified in Rome on April 29, 2012.

Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925) Feast: July 4th

Pier Giorgio was born in Turin, Italy on April 6, 1901. His father, Alfredo, founded the famous Piedmont newspaper, *La Stampa*, and played a role in Italian politics, serving in the senate and as ambassador to Berlin in 1920. His many commitments prevented him from taking an active part in his children’s upbringing. This fell to their mother, Adela, who made quite a name for herself as an artist.



Adela taught Pier Giorgio and his sister Luciana (born one year after her brother) verses from the Gospels. Pier Giorgio was deeply moved by them. Although his father was not a believer and his mother was not overly religious, Pier Giorgio developed an exceptional relationship with God. It was clearly a case of God’s grace at work in response to Pier Giorgio’s faith. From the time he was twelve until his death at 24, Pier Giorgio received Holy Communion daily.

At 17, he joined the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and committed himself to serving the poor, proclaiming: “Jesus visits me every morning in Holy Communion. I repay him with my poor means, visiting the poor.” When asked how he could stand the bad odors and unclean conditions of their homes, he answered: “Don’t forget that even if the house you visit is very dirty, there you may find Jesus.” Here again is an example of the core of Vincentian spirituality. Pier Giorgio did not love the poor in general; he loved the poor individual.

He was not afraid to voice his opinion about the Society. “I would suppress some Conferences of the Society,” he once observed. “Sometimes there are people who are rich in Christian zeal but who give up in the face of difficulties, then it’s better for them not to be in the Society. I don’t think those people act in bad faith, but it’s better for these groups not to exist.” Pier Giorgio never hesitated to help anyone, regardless of the cost to himself, and he thought every Vincentian should do the same.

In home visits, he displayed great virtue, believing that he was “poor as any poor man.” People sensed this in his demeanor and conversation. With respect, tact, and patience in listening to them, and care and simplicity in addressing their needs, he communicated his sense of equality with the poor.

In 1919, he joined the Catholic Student Federation and the Popular Party, a political organization which promoted the Catholic Church's teachings. He even entertained the idea of merging the Catholic Student Federation with the Catholic Workers' Organization. "Charity is not enough: we need social reform," he used to say, as he worked for both. He also gave his time to help establish a Catholic daily newspaper, *Momento*, which was based on the principles of Pope St. Leo XIII's encyclical on social and economic matters, *Rerum Novarum*. He wrote:

"In this trying time that our country is going through we Catholics and especially we students have a serious duty to fulfill: our self-formation. We, who by the grace of God are Catholics ... must steel ourselves for the battle we shall certainly have to fight to fulfill our program and give our country, in the not too distant future, happier days and a morally healthy society, but to achieve this we need constant prayer to obtain from God that grace without which all our prayers are useless; organization and discipline to be ready for action at the right time; and finally, the sacrifice of our passion and of ourselves, because without that we cannot achieve our aim."

Pier Giorgio also felt a strong, mysterious urge to be near the Blessed Sacrament. During nocturnal adoration, he would spend all night on his knees in profound prayer. He influenced other students to make the annual university retreat given by the Jesuits. He loved the rosary, a family practice, and prayed it three times daily after becoming a Dominican tertiary.

Pier Giorgio valued friendships. Frequently he asked friends for their prayers and he humbly accepted help, advice, and encouragement from them. He was especially close to his sister, Luciana. While Pier Giorgio focused on the poor, she concentrated on her father's world of diplomacy. The difference drew them closer as young adults. Only Luciana truly understood her brother's heart. Other family members might disapprove of his activities, but not Luciana. He often sought her advice. She knew her brother's best friends: young women and men who stood by each other and were full of fun and faith. Two of the young men became priests. With one of the girls, Laura, Pier Giorgio fell in love.

The last months of his life were filled with suffering. His parents' relationship was strained. Pier Giorgio and Luciana struggled to keep them together. Fearing that his growing love for Laura, who was not of the same social standing as the Frassatis, might exacerbate conflict in the family, he decided to give her up.

Pier Giorgio contracted poliomyelitis and became paralyzed. His family, preoccupied with caring for a dying grandmother, at first did not recognize the seriousness of his illness. Pier Giorgio asked for nothing and did not complain. On Friday, the day he usually visited the poor, he did not forget, but with his paralytic hand wrote them a message.

Pier Giorgio died peacefully on July 4, 1925 at the age of 24. When his death became known in Turin, hundreds came to view his body, out of love for this good and generous young man who'd offered everyone a kind word and a smile. Most of the mourners knew neither his name nor his social position. The Frassati family was stunned by their number and status. Luciana published several books containing the memories and words of her brother, and her reflections on him.

Pope Saint John Paul II beatified Pier Giorgio on May 20, 1990. He is an outstanding example for all Vincentians, but especially for young people who are looking for a role model. They will find someone to identify with in this vibrant young outdoorsman who combined a deep love for Christ, a desire to serve the needy, and a mission to imbue society and politics with Christian ideals.

Blessed Ceferino Gimenez Malla (1861-1936) Feast: August 2nd

For centuries Gypsies have kept their own customs and traditions. Their Catholic faith is little known or understood, but now one of their own has been raised to the altar of the Church: Blessed Ceferino Gimenez Malla, called “El Pele” and widely respected by the Spanish.

Ceferino was born in Fraga, Huesca, Spain, probably on August 26, 1861. He married a Gypsy woman from Lerida, Teresa Gimenez Castro, in a Gypsy-style ceremony and settled in Barbastro, Aragon. In 1912, Ceferino and Teresa had their marriage convalidated in the Church, and Ceferino’s life changed dramatically; he had a deep conversion experience. Having no children, they adopted a niece, Pepita, and raised her as a devout Catholic.



Though illiterate, Ceferino was a respected horse dealer. The poor, the uneducated, and even the politically powerful came to him for advice and counsel. A daily communicant, he was revered for his Catholic piety, and for his honesty in business and charity to the poor. He became an active member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and was ever ready to give generously to those poorer than he.

Ceferino used his gift as a great storyteller to teach children prayers and hymns, as well as stories from the Bible. He took part in “Eucharistic Thursdays,” and night adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.

In July 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, Ceferino was imprisoned for protesting the arrest of a priest by Spanish revolutionary militia. While in prison, he recited the rosary, which angered his guards. Offered his freedom if he would give up his beads, he refused. Ceferino considered devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary a matter of great honor and would not deny the Mother of God.

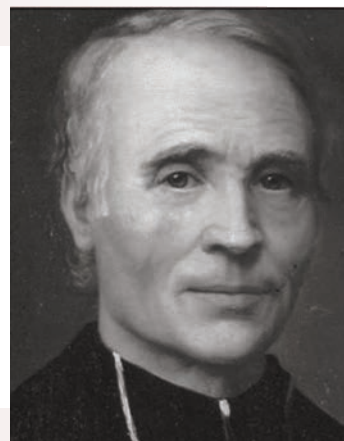
On August 2, 1936, three weeks before his 75th birthday, Ceferino was executed by firing squad, clutching his rosary and shouting, “Long live Christ the King!” Pope Saint John Paul II beatified him on Sunday, May 4, 1997, observing that a “death for the faith” is always rooted deeply in a “life of faith.” Exemplifying charity for the poor and devotion to Mary, Blessed Ceferino is a wonderful example for all Vincentians.

Venerable Alberto Capellan Zuazo (1888-1965)

On March 6, 1998, Pope Saint John Paul II issued a decree proclaiming the heroicity of the virtues of the layman Alberto Capellan. Alberto was born August 7, 1888, at Santo Domingo de la Calzada, Spain. After his death on February 24, 1965, his remains were taken to the city of his birth. Alberto was a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and president of his Conference. He manifested a gentle charity, especially to the homeless for whom he obtained shelter.

Venerable Jean-Léon Le Prévost (1803-1874)

On December 21, 1998, Pope Saint John Paul II promulgated the decree regarding the heroic virtue of the Servant of God, Jean-Léon Le Prévost. Jean-Léon was an original member of the first Conference of the Society and a close friend of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam. Frédéric mentions Jean-Léon many times in his letters. Jean-Léon became a priest and founder of the Institute of Religious of St. Vincent de Paul, a small community of priests and brothers ministering to the needy in France, Canada, Brazil, and elsewhere.



Vincentian Martyrs of Spain

Listed on the wall of the Church of St. Robert Bellarmine in Madrid, the Spanish National Sanctuary of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, are the names of 586 Vincentians martyred during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

Vincentian Family Saints, Blessed, and Martyrs

Further information is available on the Vincentian Family website: www.FamVin.org.



Index

A

Accountability	34
Admission :	
For Membership	17
Of Women	11
Aggregation	24
Ampère, Andre-Marie	79
Annunciation	64
Annual Commitment	17
Annual Report	28
Approval of Society	5

B

Bailly, J. Emmanuel	3, 4, 5, 80
Baltimore	9
Beatification:	
Vincent de Paul	75
Louise de Marillac	78
Frédéric Ozanam	83
Rosalie Rendu	86
Blessed(s), Vincentian:	
Francis F. di Bruno	89
Pier G. Frassati	91
Ceferino Malla	93
Frédéric Ozanam	79-83
Rosalie Rendu	83-86
Giusseppe Toniolo	90
Blessed Sacrament	62
Boston	9
Brooklyn	9
Buffalo	9
Bylaws	13

C

Catholic Charities	9
Catholic Social Action	9
Charitable Contributions	35
Charity and Justice	60-61
Chicago	9
Children of Mary	2
Christian (Christianity)	16
Church, Loyalty	52
Cincinnati	9
Clavé, Felix	4
Cleveland	9
Collaboration	3, 20, 22, 31
Commissioning	17
Conference	4, 15-29
Aggregation	24
Admitting Members	17
Annual Reports	28
Commissioning	17
Confidentiality	20-21
Conflict of Interest	29
Donations	23
Financial Records	27
Formation	17-18
Funds	23-24
Guidelines	29-30
Legal	27
Membership	17
Meetings	18-19
Minute Book	28
Ministry of	16
Of History	4, 80
Parish Based	15, 16
Policies	24
Record Retention	31

Recruitment	25
Reporting Procedures	27-28
Services	21-23
Speaking for Soc	29
Spiritual Advisor	45-46
Tax laws	27
Terminating members	26
Treasurer's Handbook.	31
Confidentiality	21-22
Confraternities of Charity	1
Congregation of the Mission.	1, 3, 73
Cooperation	11, 43, 44
Council(s):	
Board	34
Conflict of Interest	38
District	14, 30-38
Diocesan (Arch)	14, 30-38
Employees.	35
Functions	31
Funds	34
Incorporation	37
Institution of.	36
Meetings	33-34
Leadership.	32
Legal and Financial Realities	36
Record Retention	37
Relationships.	32
Responsibilities	31
Size	30
Speaking for Soc	38
Special works of	33
Spiritual Advisor	45-46
Tax laws	37
Council, International.	14, 43-44
International Logo	44
Council, United States	14, 39-42
Authority	42
Committees.	42
Conflict of Interest	42
Cultural Beliefs	48
Database	42
Services	41
Strategic Plan	41

D

Daughters of Charity.	1, 3, 77-78
De Paul, Vincent.	1, 71-75, 77
Detroit	9
Deveaux, Jules.	4
di Bruno, Francis.	89
Diocesan Council	30-38
District Council	30-38
Divine Providence.	66

E

Emergencies/Sp. Needs	22
Employees.	35
Essential Elements, Society	47
Eucharist.	62
Executive Directors	36

F

Feast Days:	
Vincent de Paul.	75
Louise de Marillac.	78
Frédéric Ozanam.	83
Rosalie Rendu.	86
Festival Meetings	5
Founder	3-4, 56
Founding Members.	4
Frassati, Pier Giorgio.	91
Friend(s) Friendship	47
Fundamental Principles.	47

G

Good Samaritan	58
Growth of the Society	5-10

H

Holiness	49-50
Home Visit(s)	20
Humility	49, 52-53

I

Identity Statement	48
Immaculate Conception	5, 64
Incarnation	54
Indulgences	5-6
Information/Referral Services	22
Invitation to Serve	25
Isolated Conferences	30

J

Jesus, Evangelizer	55
Judging	61-62
Justice and Charity	60-61

K

Kenrick, Bishop	8
-----------------------	---

L

Labouré, Catherine	65
Ladies of Charity (AIC)	1, 3
Lallier, François	4
Lamache, Paul	4
Lay Spirituality	56
LeGras, Mademoiselle	76
Le Taillandier, Auguste	4
Linton, Dr. Moses	8
Lonely/Alienated	22-23
Long-term Relationships	23
Louisville	9

M

Malla, Ceferino	93
Marian Youth	3
Marillac, St. Louise de	1, 75-78
Marriage	63
Martyrs, Vincentian	94
Mary	64
Mass, special	29
Member(s):	
Admitting	17
Commissioning	17
Formation	17
Termination of	25
Types of Membership	15
Miraculous Medal	65-66
Miraculous Medal Association	2-3
MISEVI (Lay missionaries)	2
Mission, of Society	47
Molla, Gianna	87-88
Mouffetard District	80, 84

N

National Council Committees	45
National Council	42-45
New Orleans	12-13
New York City	12-13
Network of Charity	51
Notre Dame de Fourviere	67

O

Old Cathedral, St. Louis	8
Ozanam, Frédéric	3-4, 79-83
Ozanam, Amélie (Soulacroix)	63, 81
Ozanam Orientation	18

P

Pampuri, Richard	88-89
Patron, St. Vincent de Paul	4, 52-56
Patroness	64
Person-to-Person	15
Philadelphia	9
Pittsburgh	9
Portland	9
Pope Gregory XVI	5
Pope Saint John Paul II	50, 53
Pope Leo XIII	82
Pope St. Pius IX	5
Pope St. Pius X	6
Pope St. Pius XI	6
Pope St. Pius XII	7
Poverty Services	21
Prayer	62-63
Prayers of the Society:	
Canonization	68
Cause, Ozanam	68
Closing Prayer	70
Opening Prayer	69
Preferential Option	57
Prevost, Jean-Léon	94
Primitive Spirit	52-53
Providence, Divine	63

R

Ratisbonne, Alphonse	67
Regional:	
Vice President(s)	39
Structure	40
Rendu, Sister Rosalie	4, 80, 83-86
Rerum Novarum	82, 90
Rule:	
Adherence	11
Beginnings	10-12
Revising the Rule	11-12

S

Sacred Heart, Consecration	68
Saint(s), Vincentian :	
Gianna Molla	87-88
Louise de Marillac	75-78
Richard Pampuri	88-89
Vincent de Paul	71-79
Saint Joseph-des-Carmes	82
Sacred Scripture:	
1 Peter 1:15-16	53
John 13:34-35	60
Luke 6:32-37	61
Luke 10:25-28	58
Luke 10:29-37	57
Matthew 6:9-13	62
Matthew 18:19-20	63
Matthew 25:31-46	57
San Antonio	9
San Francisco	9
Service(s)	21-23
Serving in Hope	18
Seton, Elizabeth Ann	2
Simplicity	49, 52-53
Sisters of Charity	2, 3
Social Justice	23, 82
Society of SVdP:	
History	3-10
Cultural Beliefs	48
Mission	47
Spirit of the	52-53
United States	8-10
Virtues	49
Vision	48
Solidarity	59
Soulacroix, Amélie	63, 81
Special works	33
Spiritual Advisor	45-46
Spirituality:	
Lay	56
Marian	64
Twinning	44
Vincentian	53-56
St. Louis	9
St. Paul, MN	9
Superior Council, US	9
Systemic Change	5, 23

T

Tax Laws	27, 37
Timon C.M., Father John	8
Truth	80
Twinning	43

U

United States, Society	8
----------------------------------	---

V

Venerable, Vincentian:	
Alberto Zuazo	94
Jean-Léon Le Prevost.	94
Vincentian:	
Celebrations	17
Martyrs	94
Family.	1-3
Marian Youth	3
Reflections	17-18
Spirituality	53-56
Service Corps	2
Martyrs of Spain	94
Vocation	51-52
Vision	48
Visitation	64
Voice of the Poor	10, 23

W

Washington, DC	9
Web Sites	3
Women, in Society	11

Y

You Did It For Me	57
You Will Not Be Judged	61
Youth	22

Z

Zuazo, Alberto	94
--------------------------	----



Vincentian Call to Action

In imitation of their founder, Frédéric Ozanam, Vincentian men and women are ready to take their place in the third millennium. They are comforted, inspired, and animated – by their spirituality and by their vocation – to be agents of mercy. They are ready to collaborate, for greater effectiveness in their service to the poor, with the broader Vincentian Family throughout the world. They look confidently to the future.

“Let us go to the poor...”



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