



Society of Saint Vincent de Paul
Council General International
16th President General

Extraordinary Circular Letter from the President General to all SSVP Conference Presidents around the world in this time of the coronavirus pandemic

“I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (Saint John 14, 18).

Introduction

These have not been easy days for humanity, especially for those most in need. The new coronavirus (Covid-19) has altered the economy and the routine of people, and has had a strong impact on the daily life of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SSVP).

All Councils, special works and Conferences are being severely affected. In addition to illness, we are seeing an increase in hunger, misery, unemployment, and above all, despair and fear.

At the Council General level, various administrative measures have been taken to respond to the effects of the pandemic. The entire international Board has acted in harmony, with responsibility, commitment and conscious that we must work with limited resources. The International Rule says, in Article 1.6, that the SSVP must adapt to the changes in the world: “Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions”¹.

As President General, I always seek to convey a **message of peace, unity and charity** to all members. Of course, during this pandemic, I could not act differently. At this very delicate moment, I believe it is also necessary to look inside our Conferences, to identify some possible difficulties that our own members may be facing.



Who is that letter for?

Therefore, **I am especially addressing this message to the presidents of the 47,000 Vincentian Conferences**, spread over the planet, responsible for the 800,000 members. The presidents of the Conferences are the most important leaders in the structure of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, because the proper functioning of these Vincentian units and the faithful observance of the Rule depend on them.

It is fundamental that the spirit of fraternal charity and total dedication to those in need can also, today, be addressed to the courageous Vincentians who are in difficulty. I invite the presidents of Conferences to reflect with me, answering the following questions, which can help us to identify the environment that surrounds us:

- 1) How is each member of the Conference coping with this crisis, especially the elderly?
- 2) Are any of our companions experiencing specific needs?

¹ Article 1.6 of the International Rule (**Adaptation to a Changing World**): “Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty that may be identified or anticipated. It gives priority to the poorest of the poor and to those who are most rejected by society”.



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3) Are there other Vincentians, from other Conferences, who also need some kind of support?

Conference's life

The members in our Conferences, in an anonymous and altruistic way, give testimony of Christ's love through the practice of charity, acting in the field of human development, seeking, through social justice, the integral relief of those most in need. The International Rule says in Article 1.9 that "Vincentians endeavor to establish relationships based on trust and friendship"². It is the responsibility of the Conference's president, according to tradition and the Rule of the SSVP, not only to supervise the activities of the group while remaining at the service of those we are privileged to assist, but also to take care of the Vincentians themselves, especially the youngest, **assisting them in their difficulties, peculiarities and needs, safeguarding the privacy of each one.**

The President must love, without reservation, all the members of the Conference, trying to do everything possible so that they also love each other. To love also means to accept people as they are, with their strengths, weaknesses, defects and virtues.

It is the responsibility of the Conference president to **cultivate true friendship amongst the members and to maintain a climate of fraternity and collaboration among them.** With generosity and attention, it is up to the Conference president to contact members who are suffering from health problems (physical or mental). This contact should be regular and, if possible, face-to-face. For example, praying the rosary in the house of the members is an excellent initiative that maintains the bonds of friendship between the members and their families. Clearly, social distancing must be maintained during the pandemic, but such contacts can also be made by telephone, email, social networks or messaging applications. **Social distancing does not mean emotional distancing**³.

Simple but true gestures

Sometimes a simple phone call from the Conference president is enough to calm the heart of the member who is experiencing some temporary difficulties. The president should act as soon as he or she notices any tribulation or abnormality in the members' behavior, always with charity, stealth, tenderness, prudence and respect.

In addition to health issues, Conference members may also be suffering from family, professional, emotional, sentimental, educational problems and, above all, a serious economic situation caused by the sudden loss of employment, increased financial debt and inability to pay the most essential expenses, such as food, rent, water, electricity, gas, telephone and internet. **Young people are usually the most affected at these times.**

With discretion and charity, the Conference president must be close to members who are in financial difficulty, encouraging alternate and creative ways to support and reverse this scenario. The president can, privately, carry out a voluntary fundraising campaign among friends to help, exceptionally, some Conference members. **After all, a Vincentian can also become poorer, materially speaking, in the face of life's temporary adversities.** During the coronavirus pandemic, we have discovered that this reality has grown significantly amongst us, and we cannot abandon our companions, ever.

Take care of ours too

² Article 1.9 of the International Rule (**Empathy**): "Vincentians endeavor to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve. Rather, they seek to understand them as they would a brother or sister".

³ During the pandemic, young Vincentians of Nigeria are developing a very innovative campaign through social networks, with creative phrases to raise people's self-esteem, spreading charity and reinforcing responsible attitudes that everyone should do to fight Covid-19.



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The president of the Conference has a role that can't be delegated in the close accompaniment of the other members of the group, helping, as far as possible, those who are going through afflictions, anxiety, anguish, depression, solitude or other invisible diseases, hard to identify. **The president of the Conference can help a lot by listening to the needs of the members, understanding them and welcoming them.** This type of action is, without doubt, a work of admirable mercy, which God will reward "a hundred times as much in this present age and in eternal life to come" (Saint Mark 10, 30).

In the International Rule we find an enlightening text that shows that friendship and mutual concern among the members is a treasure for the SSVP: "**Spiritual bonds and friendship between members are essential**"⁴.

The value of friendship between members

Friends help each other, especially in the most delicate moments of life. "We need to feel supported by each other, to tell each other that we are not alone; we need support, comfort, and prayer. The days of sadness and discouragement are numerous: on those days friendship is precious" (Letter of Blessed **Antoine-Frederic Ozanam** to his friend Leonard Gorse, 4 January 1836). "I have never been able to live without friends", Ozanam stressed on another occasion (Letter to Prosper Dugas, 11 March 1849).

In one of my articles, entitled "The Second Network of Charity", I argue that not only can we act with those we visit, but that we must take care of each other as well. The "first network of charity", focused on solidarity with those assisted, will only be effective and efficient if the "second network of charity" (among us, active members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul) is, in fact, a reality. It would be unthinkable to take care only of those we visit and to abandon the Vincentians themselves. **Charity begins at home.**

This is what our predecessors taught

Adolphe Baudon, 3rd President General, in his Circular Letter of November 1st, 1852, made a very pertinent recommendation that should move us: "The President should not only take care of the work of the Conference, but also of the fellow members. Therefore, if any of them should become ill or undergo any trial, the president is naturally appointed, on behalf of the Conference, to carry out for them the duties imposed by the circumstances".

Friendship and cooperation within the SSVP are elementary conditions inside our organization, as the 4th President General, **Antonin Pagès**, taught us in his Circular Letter of 28th April 1895: "There is a danger to which the growth of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul exposes us: the decline of the spirit of mutual benevolence and cordiality, which was the charm of the first meetings. With the expansion of the Society, the bonds of cordiality and intimacy have been weakened. Coldness and indifference are necessarily sterile".

In addition, our brother **Jules Gossin**, 2nd President General, in his Circular Letter written on November 1st, 1847, suggested a very simple way of helping anyone in need: "It is very difficult to establish the least proportion between the needs (of people) and the benefit (provided to them). However, there is a way to soften this displeasure: donate, at least, part of your superfluous expenses".

The teachings of our predecessors are very current and fill us with strength, ethically and charitably, to face the adversities of modern times. Let us remain united in prayer and try to minimize the suffering of our brothers and sisters on the Vincentian path.

⁴ Article 3.3 of the International Rule: "The members meet as brothers and sisters with Christ in the midst of them, in Conferences that are genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action. Spiritual bonds and friendship between members are essential, as is the common mission to help the poor and marginalized. The entire Society is a true and unique worldwide Community of Vincentian friends".



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Conclusion

I humbly ask that on **September 9th, 2020** (Liturgical Feast of Blessed Antoine-Frederic Ozanam), a Holy Mass be celebrated in all the parishes where there is a Vincentian Conference, for all those who died for Covid-19, especially the people we visit, our fellow members, the members of the Vincentian Family and the relatives of our members who also died because of the pandemic. If it is not possible for Mass to be celebrated in person, I invite you to organize a virtual Mass or meditation on the Holy Rosary in a remote way. I also ask the Conference presidents to share the contents of this “Extraordinary Circular Letter” with the spiritual advisor of the Conference.

I conclude this message by praying to God that our Conference’s presidents will adequately fulfill their duties, strictly following the Rule, **affectionately caring for each member, especially the young people and the elderly, in their most urgent miseries and needs, be they economic, material, spiritual, moral or social.**

Dear presidents of the Conferences of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul: **you are the servants of the servants of the poor.** May Ozanam help us overcome this worrying moment for humanity. May Our Lady take care of our lives. May God enlighten and protect us!

Paris, 20 May 2020.

Brother Renato Lima de Oliveira

16th President General

2020: International Thematic Year of Félix Clavé