



Paris, 31 January 2021



CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR FELLOW MEMBERS OF THE CONFERENCES OF THE SOCIETY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL AROUND THE WORLD

2021 - International Year of JULES DEVAUX

1. Introduction

Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ! My dear members of Saint Vincent de Paul Conferences around the world, I first wish to ask for the abundant blessings of Our Lord Jesus Christ on you, and for our Blessed Lady to be with everyone, particularly those in need whom our Society helps, whether in special works or in Conferences.

I am very pleased to be writing to you all again, sisters and brothers in the Vincentian Conferences around the world, for the sixth time since I was elected as 16th President General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, with this Circular Letter for 2021. It has been the custom since 1841 for the Presidents General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul to write Circular Letters addressed directly to the members, covering important matters on the Vincentian agenda, or for guidance to improve the work of the Conferences, special works and Councils. The Letters of the Presidents General are, it seems, very important training materials for all our members.

1.1. 2020 has truly been a year like no other

This past year has been a time which will be marked out in the history of humanity as one of the worst-ever health crises, affecting millions of lives, as well as leading to countless negative consequences for the economy of countries and of the whole world, increasing poverty, unemployment and vulnerability in society. The poor have been worst-affected. The number of refugees around the planet has increased. Students have been unable to attend class. Religious believers have not been able to attend worship or receive the sacraments. People cannot embrace or greet each other properly. Families are separated, in order to avoid large gatherings. Conferences and Councils cannot hold regular meetings. Many people in need have no help from governments or charitable organisations. It has been a very difficult year, and we will not have good memories of it.

We are now entering 2021, after a very difficult journey through 2020, in which for the first time, we published two Circular Letters. The health crisis has changed the face of the world, changed routines and procedures, adjusted expectations, and above all, has driven us to find new ways of doing charity, with creativity and innovation. All our Conferences and Superior Councils, as well as Council General itself, have had to reinvent themselves.

1.2. The subject of this Circular letter

In this Circular Letter of 2021, a year for rebuilding and new beginnings, I want to address some matters on which we all need to reflect, so that our work for those who suffer can be improving all the time. The ideas and questions I am going to cover here are also intended to alert us to the way our Councils operate, as their only purpose is to provide services for the grassroots. Some of my readers may not agree



with some of what I have to say, but at least they will know how the President General thinks, with all my flaws and limitations.

I humbly suggest that this letter should be divided into blocks or topics, and read in short sections at the meetings of Vincentian conferences. I would be delighted to receive comments, criticisms and suggestions about the content of this Letter, as well as proposals for the coming years. We have set up an e-mail address for this, cgi.circularletter@gmail.com which you can use.

May the good Lord free us from all the evils of this world, and may we, in the name of the Lord, strengthen our faith through acts of charity, among ourselves first of all, and of course, with those who are suffering. I hope you enjoy reading our Circular Letter 2021. 

2. Activities of the Council General

As I always say in my talks, presentations and letters, it is a huge and incomparable honour to fulfil the role of 16th President General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, a great responsibility towards our members, the people we help, the clergy, the Vincentian Family and others around the world. All the successes of recent years have been achieved with the unconditional support of the International Board, and the full support of the International Structure (Territorial Vice-presidents and Zone Coordinators), the staff in Paris, and the Superior Councils which form this wonderful Confederation.

2.1. Responsibilities of the President General

It is the task of the President General to point the way, suggest strategies, set the lead and maintain unity within the Confederation. But the Council can only move forward when all those around us share the same beliefs and agree to take part in the changes. This is how I see the noble task of President General: service above all. And I am taking this opportunity to thank all those who accepted my invitation to join with the Council General in any area of work.

No-one loves what they do not know¹. So we have expanded transparency, governance, democracy and dialogue within the International Council General, so that it can be even closer to the grassroots. When I travel to the countries, my greatest joy is to listen to everyone, recognising that Council General is closer to the Conferences, and provides more services than ever to the Superior Councils. Council General has to be better known, loved, valued and protected, to honour the legacy of our founding fathers.

2.2. Action of the Council General

Despite the 2020 health crisis, we have managed to continue work on several initiatives, set up in the International Strategic Plan (2016/2022), and we have also added new aspects, giving greater energy to our management. In the area of training, there have been dozens of on-line events, which have helped expand the capabilities of our members. In the field of communications, the Council General's website has been completely redesigned, and is much more attractive, informative and user-friendly. Our "Ozanam Network" newsletter is always full with content, news and training materials.

When the pandemic began in March 2020, Council General did not slow down for a minute. On the Council General's web page we publish all the administrative actions we have approved, so that the Confederation can get through this sad time for humanity. We have granted extensions to the terms of office of several Superior Councils. We have increased our international aid, sending additional resources to many nations (over 300,000 euros to some 70 countries). My main concern² is the health (physical and mental) of our

¹ See St Augustine, *The Trinity*, book X, chapter I.

² On the responsibility of Conference presidents to other members: "The president is not concerned only with the work of the Conference. They should also be concerned with the members. If any of them are sick, or going through a difficult time, the



members, and of course the harmful effects of this crisis among those in need (especially children, young people and the elderly), the unemployed and those who have lost hope. Covid-19 is a terrible illness, but even worse than this are the panic and fear the illness has aroused.

2.3. The canonisation process is speeding up

As regards canonisation of Blessed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, with God's grace the work of the Vice-Postulator in Brazil has not been delayed, and at the moment the process is already with the Postulator in Rome, beloved Father Giuseppe Guerra (priest of the Congregation of the Mission), who will continue with it at the Vatican. The Brazilian phase was fairly quick, even with the health restrictions in force, over an 11-month period of intense work and investigation. I ask all members of our Society to stay firm in hope of the canonisation, becoming truly devoted to Ozanam³. Similarly, our Conferences must prepare properly to welcome a new group of interested people after the canonisation, who will join us on the same path to holiness, in the steps of Ozanam through Vincentian service to those in need.

2.4. The impact of the pandemic

Our international travel has been seriously affected, along with the planned missions for the "SSVP Plus" project (expansion of the SSVP). Some 10 missionary visits to various countries have had to be cancelled and rescheduled for future years. Nonetheless, in 2020, I managed to visit Lebanon, Italy, Brazil, the Vatican, Portugal, France, the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland and the United States of America. These were times for personal, spiritual and Vincentian growth and understanding.

In the area of youth, we had to cancel the special assembly we always celebrate around July 4th, the WORLD YOUTH DAY. So in 2021, we are asking our members to be extra generous in their donations, which will be put to good use for Vincentian youth in every country. Some major events are approaching (the International Vincentian Family Youth meeting, World Youth Days with the Pope, and the Salamanca+15 meeting), which will need resources. In 2021, we will launch the invitation for the "Seven Founders" hymn competition in English, Italian and French, and the leaflet on "SSVP in the Universities"⁴, among other initiatives.

2.5. Innovations

We were delighted to declare the 14th August as INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR FEMALE MEMBERS, honouring Ozanam's devoted wife, Amélie Soulacroix, who dedicated her life, especially in old age, to taking care of his legacy, his biography, image, objects and writings. This date has had an excellent response from all the SSVP around the world, and many countries have celebrated this new Vincentian date, even during the health crisis. It is a proper homage to the role of women in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. And also, the more we know Amélie, the closer we can come to Frédéric.

president is naturally appointed to fulfil the duties imposed by circumstances" (Circular Letter of the 3rd President General, Adolphe Baudon, 1852).

³ *Read more about the virtues of Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam in the lovely book "Ozanam, el Servidor" (São Paulo, Brazil, 1997), written by our fellow member Laido Ciampone.*

⁴ *On founding Vincentian Conferences in colleges and universities: "There can be no denying the positive influence Conferences have on student members. Everyone acknowledges that the SSVP is a valuable feature in the great work of education, as it contributes to the growth of faith, protection of customs, the formation of character and to right judgment. These Conferences will continue to produce the hoped-for fruits. The development of a Vincentian in the practice of charity often depends on how he or she has been initiated and cared for in the early days" (Circular Letter of the 4th President General, Antonin Pagès, 1899).*



In April 2021, close to Ozanam's birthday⁵, with God's grace, we are intending to open the new head office for Council General in Paris, along with the official opening of the "Ozanam Museum" and an exhibition about the seven founders. It will be a very special moment for our Society, since from now on we will have a headquarters which is twice as large as the previous one, properly organised for the growth of the Society over the next 50 years. I want to thank again the members of the Commission who studied the economic viability of this step, and especially all the countries who voted in favour of buying the offices, in a historic, unanimous vote at the Oporto assembly (Portugal), in 2019.

2.6. Improvements in the area of administration

At the start of this year, I promoted some small adjustments to the International Structure, inviting new Vincentians to join with the Council General, creating new Vice-presidencies, working groups and commissions. A few people have completed their service in the international structure; I thank them with all my heart for their commitment, zeal and love in their service to the Confederation. With the new team, who will accompany me to the end of my term of office in September 2022, we will give a further boost to the work of solidarity and international twinning, as well as trying to achieve all of the strategic objectives. The whole Council will be working in the same direction to progress international management, preparing Council General for new times ahead.

At the Plenary Assembly of Council General in 2020, held in two sessions on line, because of the restrictions on travel between countries (4 October and 13 December), we approved some important documents for the SSVP. The first of these was the "Child Safeguarding Protocol", a statement protecting children who are involved with Conferences and Vincentian works⁶. We signed a cooperation agreement with the International Center for Formation (CIF) of the Congregation of the Mission, which will allow us to improve our training in terms of the anthropology of people in need and the theology of Saint Vincent.

We awarded the "Charity in Hope" medal to the Jesuit Refugee Service, for its amazing work carried out all over the world. Last year, we also marked 100 years since the declaration of the independence of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul by the Vatican, and 95 years since the opening of Frédéric Ozanam's beatification/canonisation process.

2.7. Contributions to Council General

I end this section with the subject of Council General's finances. Because of the health crisis, which has led to a serious economic crisis, many countries have slightly reduced their annual contributions to Council General, forcing us to rescale our procedures and adapt to the new, more restricted circumstances. I do not know if everyone is aware that Council General's finances are maintained through the generous donations from Superior Councils. For this, fifteen years ago saw the creation of the "Concordat" (a group of countries which committed to making fixed annual contributions to Council General). These extremely generous countries made themselves responsible for 95% of the expenses of the Council, and the other countries in the Confederation cover the remaining 5%.

Yet, the challenges facing Council General and for which it exists are considerable and daunting, requiring the continued financial support of Vincentians throughout the world, via their Superior Councils. The ongoing, high costs of the international office, the Structure, and the strategic planning (for instance youth,

⁵ *One of the best books to describe the life, work and legacy of Ozanam was written by our fellow member Raymond Sickinger (Indiana, USA, 2017), entitled: "Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam".*

⁶ *This protocol was approved at the Council General Assembly held on 4 October 2020. All the countries have received copies of this document, and can replicate the initiative locally. Through the protocol, our Conferences, special works and Councils undertake to protect the children and young people under our care, in charity, empathy and love. On behalf of the Council General, I thank all those who have designed this protocol, which may be considered a landmark in the history of the international SSVP.*



training, the canonisation process, extending SSVP into new countries, communications and institutional relations) are continuing to increase.

In order to fulfil financial undertakings already made, the International Rule suggests an annual collection⁷ is taken in each country, during the fourth quarter of the year, to help the International Council General⁸. This provision in the Rule is an excellent way for countries not belonging to the Concordat to increase their contributions to Council General. In this way, I earnestly hope that, with everyone's support, we can return to the trend of donations in the years before the pandemic, allowing us to achieve our strategic objectives. We are sure that 2021 will be a year of improvement, and of course, a year when Vincentian action is renewed. 

3. Recommendations to members

I believe that the most important thing in the life of a member of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is the meeting with those in need, through Christ. This personal encounter brings us to conversion of heart and a full life in the Lord, achieving happiness. Charity in all its forms is at the heart of Vincentian spirituality⁹ and is obviously the focus of our faith¹⁰. It is the *modus operandi* of the members, in every one of the 48,000 Conferences spread all over the world. It is a grace and a privilege to live in this way, when we devote our existence to good, and to service in solidarity with those in poverty. The life of the Conference is vital for the life of our members.

3.1. Huge challenges

But we meet challenges on the way. In some parts of the world, I have seen the adoption of excessive rules and regulations, hierarchical structures¹¹ and very bureaucratic procedures. We must avoid transforming our Society into one great bureaucracy, as Ozanam warned us¹². Rules are essential, but charity is more important; excessive rules and regulations deter and scare away new Vincentian vocations. Rules must also be updated and adapt to changing circumstances. We have to bring light, goodness and hope into places where sometimes there seem only shadows, crosses to bear, and darkness.

I am very concerned about the fall in the number of Conferences and Councils, and their closure, particularly in countries of importance in the history of our SSVP. Messages come to me from various

⁷ *On the importance of collections: "Generosity is another virtue which the Conference cultivates. The collection bag needs generous contributions" (Circular letter of the 6th President General, Louis d'Hendecourt, 1911).*

⁸ *Basic requirement n° 20, from the document "Basic requirements for writing Internal Statutes of Superior, Assimilated and Associated Councils" ("Collections for the poor and for maintenance of the Structure").*

⁹ *"...the poor we see with the eyes of the flesh; they are there and we can put finger and hand in their wounds and the scars of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads [...] You are our masters, and we will be your servants. You are for us the sacred images of that God whom we do not see, and not knowing how to love Him otherwise shall we not love Him in your person" (Letter from Frédéric Ozanam to Louis Janmot, 13 November 1836).*

¹⁰ *Almost at the end of his life, Frédéric, though very ill, at one of his last public appearances at the conference in Livorno, told them that the only purpose of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is to seek the holiness of the members through the exercise of charity and offer help to brothers and sisters in need. This is how the Vincentian meets the suffering face of Christ: "[The Society] has only one purpose: to make its members holy through the exercise of charity and bringing help to the poor in their material and spiritual need" (Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, Address to the Conference of Livorno, 1 May 1853).*

¹¹ *"Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule, a little here, a little there!" (Isaiah, 28:10, NIV). We have to follow the SSVP rules, but without forgetting the Gospel, and the charity we share.*

¹² *"Only one thing could hinder and destroy us: the adulteration of our primitive spirit, the Pharisaism that sounds the trumpet before it, the exclusive self-esteem which belittles any power other than that of the elite, excessive customs and structure resulting in languor and relaxation or rather a verbose philanthropy more eager to talk than to act, or again bureaucracies which impede our march by multiplying our machinery" (Letter from Frédéric Ozanam to Amélie Soulacroix, 1 May 1841).*



countries saying that, after Covid-19, many Conferences will disappear, which breaks my heart. Knowing that some of the Vincentian special works are also closing is a real shame, bringing tears to my eyes. It is mad, in my view, to be closing Conferences and special works in the post-pandemic world, when poverty and inequality are increasing. Therefore, I am asking presidents of the Councils responsible for Conferences and special works to fulfil their role in the organisation, and before any drastic decision, avoid closing any operations without addressing the challenges which lead to such closures. It is a real challenge to keep these Vincentian works operating, but on the other hand, it is of great benefit to so many people in need, especially children and the elderly who depend on them.

In terms of training, I think that on-line courses are here to stay, finally. It is important that the training sections of each Superior Council offer a range of courses, seminars and meetings, using the latest information and communications technology to help in this task. Another area which can grow significantly is that of special or social projects, which several countries and Council General sponsor, to generate work and income so that those whom we help can succeed in life. Congratulations go to Conferences who are using this model.

3.2. Unnecessary conflicts

I have also observed, in some parts of the world, a certain unnecessary abrasive attitude¹³ among members, generally caused by disagreeing about secondary issues or those unconnected to our service to the poor. Pride, egoism, vanity and envy unfortunately also affect our members; so we must ask the good Lord to drive away these feelings and thoughts which divide us and destroy our unity. So many accounts of badly-organized, stormy elections reach the Council General! Failure to accept election results is also another damaging effect which we must resist.

In order to avoid such conflict, we must above all improve our Vincentian training¹⁴. The disparity of ideas is healthy, and even advisable, without upsetting our Society. But when such conflicts are raised without charity, or verge on a lack of fraternity, kindness and decency, I believe we have reached a most unfortunate stage¹⁵. Many of our leaders have been selected without proper qualifications¹⁶, in areas such as diplomacy, crisis management, dialogue and governance. In fact, some of the problem is rooted in the choice of the right candidates, and this is entirely our responsibility.

When we have any doubts about the position to take in the face of complex or tricky issues that may arise, we simply need to ask ourselves what St Vincent or the seven founders would do in our place. Do we take on Vincentian virtues¹⁷ in the service of those in need, or do we set these virtues aside? Do we understand

¹³ *On good relations among members of Conferences: "Our shared fraternal feelings have long been our established, common practice. This warm friendship has always reigned among the members. The simplicity of meetings and their friendly atmosphere, with the camaraderie of charity, have been at the root of the strength and vitality of the SSVP from the outset" (Circular Letter of the 3rd President General, Adolphe Baudon, 1848).*

¹⁴ *Some situations we must avoid when admitting new members: "There are two dangers which seem to affect the very existence of our Society. The first is that it might simply become a benefit-sharing scheme, devoted just to distributing material assistance. The second is, that our meetings might become boring and dull, scaring off the novices" (Circular letter of 2nd President General, Jules Gossin, 1847).*

¹⁵ *On the spirit of humility and fraternity: "The reasons for the growth and success of the Vincentian Conferences lie in humility, the care we have always taken not to seek congratulations or praise, and to remove ourselves as far as possible, giving God all the credit for the small benefits we provide. Do we still observe with the same commitment this humility which our founders practised so well?" (Circular Letter of 4th President General, Antonin Pagès, 1895).*

¹⁶ *On the way in which the work of the Conference is carried out: "The main qualities a Conference president should show are: an amiable nature; sincere and ardent affection for the Conference, its members and the poor; a dislike for the spirit of routine; and finally, working constantly with care and a conciliatory attitude" (Manual of the SSVP, 1845).*

¹⁷ *On the foundations of Vincentian work: "Humility, courage and trust in God are the virtues which together form the basis and ground of our Society" (Circular letter of the 2nd President General, Jules Gossin, 1846).*



the principles and fundamentals of the Rule, or do we confuse charity with philanthropy? All this can be overcome, if we allow ourselves to be surrounded by the love of Christ, in faith and hope, serving our neighbour unstintingly. After all, our main purpose in joining the SSVP was for our personal holiness through the practice of Christian charity.

3.3. The young people, of whom we are most proud

To the young people who belong to Conferences of St Vincent de Paul, I wish to offer my sincere gratitude for their presence in our organisation¹⁸. Never lose hope. Always recall the seven founders of our Society, all young people (between 18 and 38 years of age), who were never discouraged and always gave of their best to charity. Our young people are called to be leaders of Vincentian youth, filling our Conferences with joy, enthusiasm and compassion.

Young people are the present of our Confederation. They aspire to fraternal coexistence, “founded in truth, justice, charity and love of freedom”¹⁹. In the SSVP, young people will find all those factors which give energy to Vincentian life and help to support those most in need. So, understand that from this President General, you will always receive support, encouragement, space, a voice and time. Thank you for your commitment to those most in need, and to our beloved Society. Forgive our faults, report any problems arising in Councils from people who do not have a Vincentian vocation, focus your energy on what unites us, and prepare very soon to take on important roles in the Society, because we have great hopes of you. Let us trust in you.

3.4. Tenderness, empathy and bravery

As active members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, we face enormous challenges every day, which we have to overcome, either with those we help, or in our own surroundings, that is, among ourselves²⁰, the members. But by God's grace, these obstacles can be overcome with three factors which are characteristics of every Vincentian: tenderness, empathy and courage.

Tenderness²¹ is essential to the way a Vincentian works. Without gentleness, tact, and generosity, without friendliness and fraternal love of neighbour, it is humanly impossible to practice charity. A Vincentian who does not offer great tenderness will find it difficult to achieve the virtues (cardinal and theological) of Ozanam, the other founders and Saint Vincent. Without tenderness it is difficult to listen to the poor. Without tenderness, it must be difficult to know how to advise those who are suffering²². Without

¹⁸ *On the urgent need for young members of our Conferences: “In some cities, especially where there are many students, it is a shame that Conferences, founded for the good of the young and to keep them in charity in the gentle bonds of religion, often have few if any young members. It is certain that Conferences created in colleges are sure nurseries for the SSVP, and it is appropriate for us to take advantage of this vigorous new blood they can bring us every year” (Circular Letter of the 3rd President General, Adolphe Baudon, 1851).*

¹⁹ *Saint John XXIII, Encyclical “Pacem in Terris”, § 45.*

²⁰ *Here I always like to refer to the “second network of charity” (among us Vincentians) which must go together with the first (related to those we help). This is expressed more fully in my book “Apasionados por la caridad y la justicia” [Passionate for charity and justice] (Madrid, Spain, 2017), published by the National Council of Spain.*

²¹ *“Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus (Philippians 2, 1-5, NIV).*

²² *“We wish that the blessed tenderness of Christianity towards those who suffer is felt in the organisations which assist them” (Frédéric Ozanam, in the article, “The dangers of charity” published in the journal “La Nouvelle Ere”, 29 October 1848).*



tenderness, the Vincentian message will struggle to be heard. We have to act with gentle hearts, especially those of us who are Vincentian leaders, who often govern with too firm a grip, generating discord and unnecessary conflicts.

Empathy is particularly apparent in the home visit²³, when members can feel more powerfully how hard life is for those in need. Empathy is also revealed in the Vincentian social projects, where children, the sick and the elderly also struggle to overcome adversity in everyday life. But empathy is also apparent in internal relationships, that is among the procedures and experiences of the SSVP itself, for instance among members of a Conference, or in the administrative management of Councils. Without empathy, we cannot be members. Without putting ourselves in another's shoes, it is practically impossible for someone to become a Vincentian. Empathy is everything. It is the foundation of charity and human relationships. An egoist cannot exercise charity. A person seeking their own interests does not practice human solidarity; they only appear to practice it. Charity can only happen if empathy comes first.

Finally, without courage, nothing can be done. We are so small and weak in the face of the powerful and the systems of the world, that without courage we can never face troubles with our faith, peace and hope²⁴. Courage gives us the innovative and creative spirit we need to find peaceful and effective solutions, in the search for a more fraternal and just society. Being courageous means “thinking big”, always wanting to do the best for those we help, and looking for different ways to practice charity, achieving positive results. Courage flourishes with enthusiasm. A sad or discouraged member will never radiate courage, which comes from joy and a passionate heart. Being courageous means being a visionary, a person of hope and an idealist. Being courageous also means knowing how to be outraged, seeking the material, moral and spiritual well-being of the children of God. Putting the talents and faculties God has given us at the service of charity effectively means to be courageous.

So dear brothers and sisters, we follow the Vincentian path with tenderness, empathy and bravery, in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the person of the most humble and needy. 🙏

4. Year of Jules Devaux

4.1. Literary competition

On **8 February 2021**, the International Council General will launch the fifth International Literary Competition, “The First Conference - Jules Devaux”. This will reward the essays or literary works which offer new or little-known details of the personal, professional, Vincentian and family life of Devaux, as well as highlighting his contribution to the growth of the first Conference, and the SSVP's expansion around the world.

The current Board of the International Council General continues to focus on the importance of the seven founders in the history of the SSVP, not just centred in the life of Blessed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, our greatest example, whose canonisation process is well advanced, but also in the contribution the other pioneers have made to the Church²⁵, to those in need and to humanity.

²³ On discretion: *“The efforts of the members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul are devoted only to supporting the poor and unhappy, through charitable work, to which they bring wonderful wisdom and no less admirable modesty. The more hidden is the good this Society practises, the better can it exercise Christian charity and relieve the struggles of individuals” (Pope Leo XIII, 1885).*

²⁴ *“I know nothing as fine as those fragile hearts which stay firm in the face of great duties. God shows his hand most clearly in the work of these people, not of bronze but of flesh, who seem always at the point of collapse. Their contemporaries accuse them of timidity; posterity will be amazed at their courage” (Frédéric Ozanam, article “The Dangers of Rome and its hopes”, in the journal “The Correspondent”, issue of 10 February 1848).*

²⁵ On the SSVP's support for the Catholic Church: *“The Church cannot perish, and has always grown in the midst of persecution. But it is in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul that the Church should find its most faithful advocates and boldest defenders. Let us recall, in this regard, the wish expressed by Pope Pius XI in 1925, to see a Vincentian conference founded in every parish in the world” (Circular Letter of the 7th President General, Henri de Vergès, 1931).*



The International Council General believes that the international competition “The First Conference - Jules Devaux” will be as successful as the previous ones, which gave prizes to Vincentians from various parts of the world. This is precisely what we want: a greater and better understanding of the life and work of our founders, their qualities and virtues, as well as their flaws²⁶. This is one of the main objectives this presidency of the Council General hopes to achieve.

As stated in the rules which will be available on the Council General’s web page (www.ssvpglobal.org) in the next few weeks, in accordance with the guidelines used for previous competitions, cash prizes will be given²⁷ to the winning writers as well as to their Conferences. We are sure that the academic work on Devaux will be just as valuable as those on Bailly de Surcy (2017), Lallier (2018), Lamache (2019) and Clavé (2020), offering interesting features and details from the life of this man who was so important in the SSVP's history.

We invite all Superior Councils to publish articles and reflections on the dominant role of Devaux in the process of founding the SSVP, stimulating the study of his life and work, in personal, professional, academic and Vincentian terms, contributing with Council General to the start of the 2021 International Themed year.

Council General suggests that on **8 December 2021**, the closing date for the “International Year of Jules Devaux”, a thanksgiving Mass is celebrated in all parishes around the world, as a memorial for our founder Devaux. Also, on **27 October 2021**, the anniversary of Devaux’s death, Conferences should recall his story, reading passages on him as the spiritual reading at conference meetings.

The present board of Council General is continuing to work to make the seven founders better known, loved and admired, because the SSVP’s foundation was a collective action²⁸, and they are all equally important in the story of this new Society. It would be a great injustice to neglect this.

4.2. Who was Jules Devaux?

Jules-François-Louis Devaux was born on **18 July 1811** in Colombières (France). Son of a doctor, Jules Devaux first studied at the Collège Royale in Caen. Age 20, in 1830, he went to Paris to study medicine at the Sorbonne. There he first met Frédéric Ozanam and the other founders, at the university²⁹, and took part in the Conferences of History, though was not very active in the discussions.

In 1833, Devaux was one of the seven founders of the first Conference of Charity. Chosen as the Conference's first treasurer, he was also the first treasurer of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Devaux was amusing, and he used his hat as a bag for the weekly collections. It was Devaux who put the group in touch with Sister Rosalie Rendu, the Daughter of Charity, who immediately approved their intentions, and showed them practical ways of working with those most in need. He probably knew Sister Rosalie well before the foundation of the SSVP.

Having completed his medical studies, Jules Devaux left Paris in 1839 to settle in Normandy, in the town of Trivières. He practised medicine in Honfleur. After his mother’s death, he temporarily gave up medicine.

²⁶ In this regard, the book “Federico Ozanam: un intelectual al servicio de los pobres” [Frédéric Ozanam: an intellectual serving the poor” (Paris, 2003), by Gérard Cholvy, reveals the simple way of Ozanam and the other founders, despite their great learning and scholarship.

²⁷ We thank the Central Council of South Tyrol, Italy, for its generous and on-going help to enable the International Council General to reward the winners each year.

²⁸ You can read more about the shared foundation in the book “La Société de Saint Vincent de Paul au XIX siècle” (Paris, 2003), by Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée.

²⁹ In the book “Frédéric Ozanam, professor at the Sorbonne: his life and work”, by Kathleen O’Meara, written in 1876, we find a wealth of detail about the relationship among the seven founders and Ozanam’s leadership in the process of founding the first Conference. We strongly recommend the corrected and annotated edition by the SSVP member and writer Javier Fernández Chento, published in Madrid in 2017.



He travelled throughout Europe, especially in Germany, where he tried unsuccessfully to found a Vincentian Conference. Devaux lived in Munich, and worked there with Father Maret. Devaux was married and had two kids. There is little information about our beloved Devaux. He died at the age of 69, in the French capital, on **27 October 1880**. 🌊

5. Conclusions

On the flag of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, we find the motto of the Vincentian mission, on behalf of the humblest people, written in Latin: “*Serviens in spe*” (serving in hope). Why does this phrase appear on our emblem? What does the SSVP have to do with hope? Hope for what, or hope in what?

5.1. Hope, faith and charity

The International Rule of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul devotes a lot of space to the theological virtue of hope. Several articles, provisions and notes mention the word hope. In article 1.2 for instance, entitled “The Vincentian vocation”, hope is very important: “The vocation of the Society's members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope”

Whenever the word hope appears in the International Rule, it is combined with the following terms: service, joy, spirituality, vocation, faith and charity. This list of references is based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which describes the theological virtues (those which bring us closer to God): faith, hope and charity.

The Catechism states that hope is “Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises”; and the Church defines charity as “the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbour as ourselves for the love of God”, with the love of the children of God and of our brothers and sisters which Christ commands us to practice.

Analysing these two virtues (hope and charity) in detail, we understand that both are related, one depending on the other: I am loving to my neighbour and I hope for eternal life in God. It's that simple. So, dear brothers and sisters, let us centre ourselves in hope, seeking salvation for our souls and providing help for those in any need, with the same devotion and energy³⁰. During this pandemic through which we are living, hope and generosity are the only viruses we share. With hope, following in Vincent's footsteps and the example of our seven founders, we will transform the world. I believe this is true, do you?

Moreover, on our daily journey as baptised, Vincentian Christians, we can experience countless troubles and challenges, in all areas of our life: in the family, at work, in our studies, seeking a job, in our health and so many other aspects of being human. In the Church and in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul too, we sometimes experience heartaches and setbacks which leave us very disappointed and disillusioned with people on occasion.

5.2. Shadows, crosses and darkness

³⁰ *The human face of charity teaches that the poor are not invisible, anonymous people whom we meet, but our brothers and sisters, with whom we share what we are and what we have. This is the true dimension of charity: “When our Lord said: ‘The poor will always be with you’, it was not a curse he left to his disciples, but a word of hope and charity” (Frédéric Ozanam, extract from the minutes of general meetings, 1 February 1836 to 19 March 1848, Archives of the SSVP, register 103). Christian hope, founded on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, thus finds its support in charity, because we are co-participants in building the Kingdom of God. A believer cannot but see and meet Jesus Christ when they are with the poor person.*



On one occasion, a more experienced member comforted me, saying: “There is light and darkness everywhere, and in our Society, we experience the same lights and face the same shadows as in any other organisation”. For me, this member was very wise, leading me to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of our organisation, but above all on the need for resignation and resilience in facing the problems which we will certainly experience in our lives.

In my life as a Vincentian member, I have felt intense emotion and I have also witnessed some less favourable times. As in any human activity, we meet people around us whom we cannot trust, or who are only seeking to cause conflict. There are also some who use the SSVP to create a political career, or to promote themselves, having no Vincentian vocation.

There are some leaders who are extremely tough in dealing with members, with employees and volunteers, and who act without charity. It is painful to have to speak about these shadows, which are true wounds dividing our efforts and causing suspicion to fall on anyone. We ask God that Vincentian leaders should be “called and blessed, and their fruits multiplied”, as God promised the Jewish people; “Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many” (Isaiah, 51:2, NIV).

So faced with this cruel reality, I beg you: be strong, be faithful and do not falter. “The Lord himself goes before you. He will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deuteronomy, 31:8, NIV). Let us stay firm in the Lord, as He will never abandon us³¹. We suffer many difficulties, but they will be extinguished by the light of the Holy Spirit of God. When we least expect it, darkness will give way to light. “God said: ‘Let there be light’. And there was light. And God saw that it was good. And God separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:3ff).

5.3. Encouragement to overcome

I want all the members, and the volunteers and employees of the SSVP around the world, to keep doing the necessary and demanding work of charity, together with the humblest people, with care, love and charity, never judging the poor without above all understanding the reality of their lives and their needs. Sometimes we do not realise our own strength which comes from God. Be peaceful, gentle, loving towards those who suffer. Avoid conflict and bureaucracy; instead, follow the Rule in love of the seven founders. Seek to resolve any conflict, and do not waste time on less important, secondary and mundane affairs. Salvation awaits us.

We ask God, through the intercession of our Lady, that those persecuted in various parts of the world, for religious or political reasons, might be protected and supported. We ask the Lord for peace in the world, care for the environment and an end to all forms of poverty, whether moral³², material or spiritual. May all of us, as members, always defend life, and fight against abortion and euthanasia, bringing Gospel values and Vincentian virtues wherever we go (Acts 10:38).

5.4. The year to rebuild the world

In 2021, after overcoming the health crisis, we have to make up for lost time. Our Conferences will have to double their efforts to recover what has been lost. Within the Council General, we will also be doing

³¹ Frédéric Ozanam invites us to place our trust in God, even when our plans don't come out as we asked: “Let us want what God wants, including uncertainty. Uncertainty is precisely the test he sets us to see how much we place our trust in him” (Letter to Amélie Soulacroix, 27 July 1844), knowing that, although it seems our prayers go unheard, God is “like a mother who takes her child from the seat where it sits, but only to clasp it in her arms”.

³² On moral poverty: “We can provide great service to the poor and the working classes, helping them to solve their problems. But this is only the surface, what is visible. The concern must always be for moral benefit, and this is the essential work of the SSVP, whose charity is not limited just to material interests, but which seeks above all to reach hearts and souls. All our work should have this dual character” (Circular Letter of the 5th President General, Paul Calon, 1907).



this. All the activities which should have happened in 2020, such as the opening of the new Head office in Paris, and several missionary journeys (for the President General and for the Structure) will be underway in the coming years again, with renewed emphasis. We will make up for this with hard work, greater dedication and service.

Council General can never slow down, as the International Confederation depends on its vitality and energy to “inoculate” the world with good viruses. We are absolutely certain that the good Lord will never abandon us. **We Vincentians are in the world as the soul is in the body**³³. So, my dear brothers and sisters, in this year of 2021, let’s remain firmly devoted to Ozanam and true champions of hope, charity and peace! May the peace of Christ be with you all. 



Member **Renato Lima de Oliveira**
16th President General



³³ We are paraphrasing a passage from the letter to Diognetus (120 AD) which says: “Christians are in the world as the soul is in the body”. Some writers attribute this saying also to Justin Martyr (100-165).