



Paris, 31 January 2020

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

2020 - International Year of *Félix Clavé*

1. Introduction

Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ!

Dear brothers and sisters, fellow members and aspiring members, esteemed employees of the Society and of our Special Works, dear colleagues and volunteers, spiritual advisers, friends of the Vincentians and of the International Vincentian Family.

I am very pleased to be writing to you all again, the sisters and brothers in the Vincentian Conferences around the world, for the fourth time since I was elected the 16th President General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, with this Circular Letter for 2020.

It has been the custom since 1841 for the serving President General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul to write Circular Letters, covering important matters on the Vincentian agenda, or for guidance in improving the work of the Conferences and Councils. For me in particular, it is a gift from God to be able to write these lines, to the brave army of charity, the 800,000 volunteers¹ around the world, working on behalf of those in need on five continents. You cannot imagine the happiness and emotion I feel in writing these words.

I hope that God inspires me so that the content of this Circular Letter might be appreciated by everyone, and read in Conferences and in the various branches of the Vincentian Family during 2020, the year of our founder Félix Clavé².

During these three years and more of my term of office, I have been privileged and very honoured to visit some 40 Vincentian countries, always being welcomed with great affection and charity. I learn a great deal everywhere I go, and carry in my heart the extraordinary experiences I have had, the lessons I have been able to assimilate, and the good practices I try to share around the world. What pleases me most in my official trips is to embrace and talk with our fellow members, find out what they want, appreciate their successes and understand their disappointments, and above all, take the message of peace, unity, concord and hope which the International Council General has sent out to all nations, ever since it was formed in 1839.

Being President General is a great privilege and honour, as well as a huge responsibility to represent you all. Of course, the international presidency is not only for me. I have the invaluable support of the Board, and of the office staff. Sometimes, we do not agree about everything, but we always seek conciliation when taking decisions. We can also make mistakes, but we also know how to forgive each other for any fault.

We are also blessed with the support of Superior or National Councils, which guarantee solidarity, respect and financial support for the Council General, so that it can fulfil its official role as defined in the Rule and the Statutes. It is a collective force, in which our Lord Jesus Christ is exalted and those in need are cared for. We are simply instruments of Divine Providence, serving our brothers and sisters who are most in need³.

¹ Vincentians are somewhat like hummingbirds, collecting water in their tiny beaks to put out the forest fires. More details on this can be found in an article published by the President General, Renato Lima de Oliveira, in the book "Passionate for charity and justice" (Madrid, Spain, 2017), published by the National Council of Spain. The text makes it clear that, although we can do relatively little, given the huge social challenges facing the human race, nonetheless we are doing something positive for the world.

² Little is known, certainly, about the life and work of this co-founder, Félix Clavé. The recommended reading is the book *Hosanna* (USA, 2013), written by Father

Ronald Ramson, CM, which has a chapter devoted to Clavé's life and other details about the lives of the seven founders and some of their friends.

³ One of the most brilliant SSVSP publications is the book "Vademecum del Vincenziano" [Vincentian Handbook] (Turin, Italy, 2000), published by the National Council of Italy, which offers the "Ten Commandments for the Lay Vincentian" in Chapter 6. These duties and responsibilities include: be available to serve others; have a strong moral and Christian training; develop a deep, personal spirituality; never neglect the visit to those we are helping; and always maintain great love for those in need, in any circumstances. The book is a jewel of world Vincentian



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. We have set up an e-mail address for this, cgi.circularletter@gmail.com which you can use.

May our Lord protect us from the evils of this world, and may we increase our faith in his Name, through works of charity, among ourselves and with those who are suffering first of all. And together may we act on what Jesus tells us: "Anyone who wants to be first, must be the very last of all and servant of all" (Mark: 9, 35)

I hope you enjoy reading our Circular Letter of 2020. 

2. Information from the Council General

In the first years of our present term of office, we have achieved a great deal, based on the synergy among the members of the Board, and in line with the strategic plan approved in 2016. There are many initiatives underway, which are now beginning to show encouraging results for the full development of our Society. The creation of the Ombudswoman General service is one such notable point, giving Vincentians the opportunity to resolve any local conflicts, through mediation from Council General. We have also made changes to the membership of the International Structure, allocating talents in a better way, and encouraging rotation of jobs, which has been very beneficial for Council General.

Transparency in decision-making and finances of the Council General, together with dialogue which the President General himself and the Board maintain with all Superior or National Councils, are key to the success of any institution. In the case of the International Council General, after accepting suggestions from the grassroots, we have expanded the number of council members, improving the democratic decision-making process, reconciling points of view at various times - but always with consensus - on the direction the SSVP should take in order to succeed. This has greatly improved the quality of the Council, and we are moving forward along these lines. "The sun's rays do not burn until brought to a focus" (Alexander Graham Bell).

literature, and the recommendations it holds are vital for the all-round training of us as members.

The new offices in Paris at rue de la Glacière were purchased through a property deal which was very favourable to the SSVP. With God's grace, and the approval of Superior Councils, we have moved to a new address, and now we can prepare the Council General for the future. The new offices are much larger (double the previous space), in a good location, modern and spacious, really much more suitable both for the staff and for the Vincentians. It took some two years to complete the purchase of the offices, from the time we received the financial proposals from the likely purchasers, until the end of the negotiations, which took place at the international plenary meeting in Oporto in June 2019, when after a lengthy discussion, we voted in favour of the sale of the property in rue de Londres, and the purchase of the building in rue de la Glacière. On behalf of the International Board, I am pleased to announce officially that the offices will open their doors in February 2020, and that we will also have a lovely religious service, with blessing of the premises, in September.

I would also like to thank the countries who regularly send their annual donations from our beloved members, as a sign of unity and faithful support of the SSVP hierarchy, so that the International Council General can continue its mission of maintaining unity within the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to all members and benefactors who have been extremely generous to the Council General, in their support for the collections specifically for this purpose. To the countries which form the "Concordat" (a group of Superior Councils who have signed an annual fixed agreement for contributions to Council General), all that remains is to say: **THANK YOU**. The agreement will be renewed in June 2020, at the annual plenary meeting in Nairobi (Kenya). We ask all countries, if possible, to make a slight increase in the amount of their donation, so that Council General can do more, serve more, visit more, collaborate more. 

2.1. Youth

Children, adolescents and young people⁴ are essential, strategic and vital for our society. As well

⁴ "We are a society formed mainly of lay people and young people seeking salvation". This sentence is from a letter from Ozanam to the SSVP in Mexico, dated 19 September 1845, and reproduced in the book "Antonio-Federico Ozanam: Un modelo, una referencia" [Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam: A model and an example] (Oporto, Portugal, 2018), written by our fellow member José García.



as the International Council General, Superior and National Councils certainly focus on this subject, opening up spaces for young people, offering training courses for them, forming future leaders, and setting aside funds for promoting action with young people.

The “International Collection for Youth” on 4 July (feast day of Blessed Pietro Giorgio Frassati), started last year by the Council General, will be repeated in 2020 and in subsequent years, given the excellent results it has had. In fact, the lack of resources to support the work with young people is a long-standing issue, noted by young people themselves on several occasions, which has now received a response from on high. The collection is an invitation for all members to show their support and promotion of Vincentian youth, in a concrete, effective way.

Countries which already have some kind of demonstrably effective funding method for young people are not obliged to organise this kind of collection. Nonetheless, we strongly recommend it is done, because it is a way for us to involve all members effectively in this strategic objective (increasing the presence of young people in the SSVP). At the suggestion of some Councils, Council General has agreed that the collection can take place during July, not just on the 4th, in order to reach all Conferences, to maximise the results of the collection.

Pursuing the topic of youth, I am proposing an idea to Superior Councils: to found Vincentian Conferences in universities, colleges and schools⁵. Initially our work would be easier in educational establishments maintained by Catholic congregations, by the SSVP itself and by the Vincentian Family. This action should also spread to non-Christian bodies as well, however. Youth committees or departments in all countries would be very useful in this regard. I am sure that our founders, who had the University of the Sorbonne⁶ as the favourable academic environment for

founding the SSVP, would be very pleased with this initiative, a kind of “return to the roots”.

This is the call the President General makes in this Circular Letter to all young Vincentians around the world: take our organisation into the universities⁷. It will not be an easy task, given the challenges in today's university sector, but God will provide, will light the way for us and open the doors to charity. One idea is to promote student competitions on social justice, hold debates about social teaching⁸ with professors, academic activities, book launches, present social initiatives such as street pastors and care for the homeless, etc. 

2.2. United Nations

We will strengthen the presence of the SSVP in the United Nations system. The membership and structure of the working teams we have in Paris, New York and Geneva will be enhanced and improved. We intend to create a small office in New York, to support the work, activities and projects relating to the UN's “Sustainable Development Goals”⁹ which are mainly directly related to the goals of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, including the eradication of poverty, the end of hunger, generation of employment for all, reduction of social inequality and care for the environment.

In July 2019, I was privileged to spend a whole week attending government events, debates and technical discussions at the United Nations in New

⁵ Adolphe Baudon was the 3rd President General, with the longest term of office of all presidents general: 38 years, from 1848 to 1886. In the Circular Letter from Baudon, dated 1 November 1851, Council General at this time encouraged the creation of “School Conferences”, established in French schools to attract young people to the SSVP. Baudon wrote: “Schools Conferences are beginning to spread among us, and should become even more numerous. Of course, when students leave school, they will seek out the Conferences in the town where they live. School Conferences are secure nurseries for the Society, and we should benefit from this vigorous young growth which can draw us forward through the years”.

⁶ “Ozanam is an eminent lay apostle, whom Vatican Council II declared was urgently needed in modern times”, said the writer Ambrosio Romero Carranza, in chapter 17 of his book “Ozanam y sus contemporáneos” [Ozanam and his contemporaries] (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1951), mentioning Ozanam's time at the Sorbonne as both student and teacher.

⁷ The SSVP's links to universities are well described in the book “Ozanam in his correspondence”, by Monsignor Baunard (Dublin, Ireland, 1925), whose chapter 15 describes the university origins of the Conferences of Charity. In the book, we find a letter from Ozanam to his mother, written on 23 July 1836, in which Ozanam explains that the youth Conferences should not be too concerned about money: “Divine Providence provides. I am now firmly convinced that we should never be anxious about financial resources for the work of charity, for they will always come.”

⁸ Nor do members of the SSVP always manage to separate wise political action and defence of social rights (recommended to the laity by the Church) from the problems surrounding politics, such as corruption and other aberrations. Ozanam was unmatched in his ability to maintain a moderate political and institutional role defending those in need, and fighting for social justice. In the book “Ozanam el Servidor” [Ozanam the Servant] (São Paulo, Brazil, 1997), by our fellow member Laido Ciampone, there are many references to Ozanam's effective political focus and the Church's Social Teaching. Our main founder became a candidate for deputy in France, winning great support (16,000 votes), but not enough to win a seat. Perhaps the reason for his failure to get elected was that he campaigned for only four days. “If I had devoted more time to the campaign, and covered more electoral districts, I could have won”, said Ozanam, commenting on the result of the legislative elections in 1848. We recommend reading the chapter on “Ozanam el político” [Ozanam the politician], in this fine book. Many readers would be surprised at the content of this chapter, and might change the way they see and deal with politics.

⁹ There 17 goals: 1) Eradication of poverty; 2) Zero hunger and sustainable agriculture; 3) Good health and wellbeing; 4) Quality education; 5) Gender equality; 6) Clean water and sanitation; 7) Affordable and clean energy; 8) Decent work and economic growth; 9) Industry, innovation and infrastructure; 10) Reduced inequalities; 11) Sustainable cities and communities; 12) Responsible consumption and production; 13) Climate action; 14) Life under water; 15) Life on land; 16) Peace, justice and strong institutions; 17) Partnerships.



York, and I could see we need to expand the presence of the SSVP at international forums, as well as continuing to support the “Vincentian Coalition”, a group formed by the Vincentian Family to influence the United Nations decision-making processes, as a non-governmental organisation. This is slow and difficult work, but very beneficial for those in need, who have no voice on the global scene. Institutional and government relationships, like the call “to defend the poor”, are strategic and political activities¹⁰ in which the SSVP needs to be more involved, as people in need seem to have no future or expectations, and in many situations, the Vincentian is their only hope. 

2.3. Achievements in communications

We have worked hard to develop new means of communication between Council General and the grassroots, with greater participation by everyone, especially working together with communications departments of Superior Councils, which have been effective in the distribution of international news to local levels.

The “Ozanam Network” magazine is more up-to-date and informative with every issue. The International Council General has a much greater presence on social networks. For the first time in the history of the SSVP, the President General is taking part in live video-conferences (“Talk Shows”), answering questions from the world’s Vincentians, with no holds barred. New training materials also need good communications, ensuring the documents provided are attractive. The international website will continue to try out new ideas, and has already published a new official video.

There is still a great deal to do, but there has been remarkable progress. I invite Superior Councils to send us more news about the SSVP in their region of the world, as well as our fellow members and friends who can share information and Vincentian events on social networks, to add value, attract more sympathisers and donors, stimulate recruitment and deepen our Vincentian charism. This must always be done responsibly, without focusing on personalities. 

2.4. Special working committees

¹⁰ Another reference balancing Christian participation in politics is the book by John Honner: “Love and Politics” (Melbourne, Australia, 2007).

Consensus is a good way to conduct the decision-making process, which is how the President General works at all times in the Council General. Decisions are shared, discussed, considered and then adopted. Special working committees are an important support tool for achieving this consensus.

Currently there are four committees operating, the results from which will be gathered in the future. The first is examining the possibility of creating new Superior Councils in India (the International Rule allows countries with more than 3000 Conferences to create further Superior Councils, after careful consideration).

The second committee relates to a possible change in our Society’s logo, with countries having to decide whether to retain the current design (a blue globe with the link of fraternity), approved in 1999 and modernised in 2018, or if we take a step forward with a new visual identity (this decision will be taken in June 2020, at the international plenary). The third is about the reform of the Council General’s Statutes, which may need some improvements, if that is the decision of the countries. The fourth committee is considering the possibility of asking the Vatican to declare Ozanam¹¹ a “Doctor of the Church”, no doubt helping to encourage devotion to him and further spread his reputation beyond the Vincentian world.

The other working committees, appointed between 2016 and 2018, have concluded their work, and have been a great help to the Council General, issuing final reports for the decisions to be taken by collegial agreement. I would therefore like to thank all the Vincentians forming these committees, for their kindness, objectiveness, experience and their zealous concern for the future of the Society. 

2.5. Expansion of the SSVP

The “SSVP Plus” project is starting to produce its early results. Since 2016, we have succeeded in

¹¹ For those who do not know much about the beatification of Frédéric Ozanam, the process for which began in 1925, there is some detailed information available about the miraculous cure of the Brazilian Fernando Luiz Benedito Ottoni, which took place through Ozanam’s intercession. In the publication, “Le Livre des Malades” [The Book of the Sick], written by Ozanam, and edited by the International Council General (Paris, France, 2013), to commemorate Ozanam’s bi-centenary, President General Amin de Tarrazi wrote an article on the background to the miracle, with valuable, little-known information from Fernando’s father, our fellow member Pio Benedito Ottoni. This report was included in the beatification process for Ozanam, and was fundamental to the declaration by the Church in 1997.



adding four new countries to the list of Vincentian territories: Liberia, Cyprus, Cayman Islands and Albania. Looking ahead to 2022, 15 new, potential areas have been identified where we firmly believe it will be feasible to establish Vincentian Conferences. In a few days, 16 January 2020, the 150th Vincentian territory will be reached, as the Conference of St Peter is formed at the Vatican, a fine project, achieved by the Italian brothers and sisters. There is no let up to the work, however, so we ask for your prayers. The “SSVP Plus” project has its own management structure, and relies on support of International Territorial Vice-presidents, and Superior Councils, of course, who have helped Council General with financial and human resources to ensure the missionary and training work in these new regions is completed effectively and to a high quality, extending Ozanam’s ideal of a “network of charity”. 🙏

2.6. Role of Superior Councils

The Council General, according to the Rule, acts as global coordinator for the work of the SSVP, but Superior Councils can help Council General in this task. There are many initiatives which countries can take without the need for Council General to intervene.

For instance, sending missionaries to work with another National Council in founding Conferences, or transferring knowledge to help support administrative management of Councils; sending resources for “Twinning”, as well as contributing to the Funds International for Solidarity (FIS) and the Commission for International Aid and Development (CIAD); distributing training material for Conferences, Councils, special works and youth committees; youth exchanges between friendly Vincentian nations; sponsoring international events; extra financial support for the President General's trips¹²; producing videos and other social communication initiatives which can be shared among Superior Councils using the same language; and many other possibilities. As Saint Vincent de Paul said, of the Eucharist: “Love is infinitely inventive”.

So the International Council General is deeply grateful to Superior Councils who are proactive and help to promote the Vincentian charism throughout the world, complementing the role undertaken by

Council General. I am also delighted to note that this will be the third year for awarding the “Charity in Hope” medal, public recognition given by the International Confederation of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul to organisations which provide an important humanitarian and social service, especially in the poorest nations. The Rotary Club received this award in 2018, and the Scouts in 2019. The organisation which Council General will choose to receive the medal in 2020 will be one of those nominated by Superior Councils by 28 February 2020. The award ceremony will be held, God willing, in Nairobi in June this year, and every Council may suggest up to three organisations and/or individuals, in accordance with the rules for awarding the medal. 🙏

3. Recommendations to Vincentians

In this section of the Circular Letter, I, as President General, offer some questions which, according to the place or circumstances, are not being addressed properly, and which could serve as example to other places. The following comments, far from being moral criticism or empty opinion, express what I have seen during the international trips I have had the privilege to make, or are based on messages I have received, by e-mail or via social networks. In many cases, the problems experienced in some parts of the world will be resolved only with three essential ingredients: many prayers¹³, urgent renewal of attitude on the part of members who are leaders, and setting aside of personal opinions. Without these three elements, situations will continue without being resolved, causing harm and internal conflict. 🙏

3.1. Joys and disappointments

I have observed that many members of our Conferences are suffering from problems which we meet in managing the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, in leading Councils, in the way that our support works operate, and in the conduct of the work of Conferences. You can be sure that the President General weeps and suffers the same problems as you do, the same troubles, the same disillusionment and anguish. I cannot be happy when a Conference shuts down. I will never cheer

¹² As the Central Council of Phoenix (USA) did, sponsoring the President General's visits to South America.

¹³ The book “Hope Always Awake” (Maryland, USA, 2017), written by Father Rory Conley, offers 230 suggestions for prayer, which can certainly assist Vincentians to deepen their own daily meditation, faith and contemplation.



when a social action has to close its operation. I cannot feel joyful when I see political disputes about elections to Councils. I cannot understand how some members, many of whom are considered to be “the moral storehouse of our organisation”, can conspire or spread false witness simply to destabilise the leadership of a National Council, through envy or vanity. May the Lord free us from these evil influences!

On the other hand, the President General smiles, celebrates, praises and is filled with excitement for the successes achieved by social projects and the work of Conferences to overcome poverty, improve living conditions for older people, recover family values, promote Christian principles for the unconditional defence of life, for the positive results of Vincentian works (nurseries, schools, homes for the elderly, youth centres and others) in the community and the parish. And the President General breaks into a huge smile on seeing the strength of Vincentian work all over the world, and glows with pride for it! 

3.2. Our own problems

Another aspect I have observed, for which we need an urgent “examination of conscience”, is that of the personal problems facing our fellow members in their own lives, which do not always receive the attention and understanding they should from other Conference members. The Conference president has the vital role - as good Vincentian tradition teaches us - of supporting every member of the group along their own path (spiritual, material, psychological, family, emotional and mental), and taking care of them. It is the duty of the Conference president to understand the reasons why a member is absent from meetings, or is not acting properly in the Conference's charitable works, such as home visits or other charitable activities decided by the group. Question: Why do some members fail to attend spirituality events? Why are so few attracted to the gatherings and meetings organised by Councils? It is the Conference president who has to listen, discreetly and courteously, to the hearts of the members, showing them the spiritual benefits of taking part in these events.

There are also members who are going through difficult times, for a variety of reasons, such as unemployment, health problems in the family, personal dramas with relationships with their

children, issues coping with the work environment, conflicts with representatives of the Church, unjust persecution and economic upheavals which rob us of our peace of mind. We need to be loving, friendly and welcoming to our Vincentian brothers and sisters¹⁴, with the same affection, devotion and commitment that we give to the brothers and sisters helped by the Conference and its work. We have to act with fairness, inside and outside the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, to build “the two networks of charity”, which will give us the strength we need to overcome life's challenges: the first with the vulnerable, the second among ourselves, the beloved members of the SSVP. 

3.3. We are always Church!

I also observe in some places, a certain unjustified detachment from the Church, perhaps because of possible local problems which could lead to particular restrictions. But this is not an appropriate attitude. We are Church in all situations, “in sickness or health, joy or sorrow”, like a marriage¹⁵. We have to support the Church at difficult times and when it is attacked by the communications media and political ideologies contrary to the Gospel; at the same time, we will celebrate with the Church the times of happiness, progress and triumph. We have always been linked to the Church¹⁶ and we cannot renounce our origins.

So there is no way to make the practice of the sacraments or of doctrine flexible, or up-to-date, because if we are Church, we have to defend everything which unites us to God through the magisterium of the Church. Our Rule, statutes, decisions, official documents and public statements have always to be aligned with the beautiful Catholic faith, its precepts and foundations. Being

¹⁴ “Internal relationships” are also very difficult within the SSVP. There is a masterly treatment of this subject by our fellow member Eduardo Marques in the book “Reflexiones Vicentinas sobre los Evangelios” [Vicentian Reflections on the Gospels] (Madrid, Spain, 2019), sponsored by the National Council of Spain, which links the Vincentian message to the Sunday liturgy.

¹⁵ “I want to ask you that despite the scandals, errors and desertions of all kinds which may arise in the Catholic field, never to abandon the religion of Christ, because it is the only true faith”, wrote Ozanam to his wife Amelia, in a letter dated 1 September 1853, bidding farewell to his beloved companion of 12 years of marriage. And Ozanam added to Amelia: “Always remain faithful to the religion in which I found light and love”. This passage is contained in the book “Ozanam y sus contemporáneos” [Ozanam and his contemporaries] (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1951), by Ambrosio Romero Carranza, Chapter XXXIX (“El último viaje” [The final journey]).

¹⁶ The importance of the Catholic Church for the life of the SSVP is well-stated in the book “Le centenaire de Frédéric Ozanam” [The centenary of Frédéric Ozanam] Paris, France, 1914), by the President General Paul Calon. This publication emphasises the importance of good relations with popes, cardinals, bishops, priests and other Catholic authorities.



Vincentian means being Church. The SSVP cannot allow itself to be carried away by secular manners or thinking contrary to the teaching of Jesus, of the Holy Church and the Holy Father.

The same applies to our close and intimate relationships with the Vincentian Family, of which we are part, and on which we depend to strengthen us. For the “World Day of the Poor 2020”, the International Council General will suggest to the International Executive Committee of the Vincentian Family that it should take joint actions in support of the Church and of those most in need. We must also strongly support the “13 Houses”¹⁷ project, which is aimed at addressing the problem of homelessness, with steps to support refugees around the world. The SSVP must engage in radical involvement with all “Systemic Change” initiatives to improve education for the people we help, to promote inclusion, seek a dignified life for those in need and help to find work for the unemployed. Working together, the SSVP and the rest of the Vincentian Family can do much for the most vulnerable.

We are an inseparable part of the life of the Church. For instance, we belong to the “Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life” at the Vatican, sharing its concerns and undertaking coordinated action. An essential subject for the Church is the protection of minors, and the International Confederation of the SSVP, in line with the action of the Church, must adopt a protocol which follows the principles set out by the Supreme Pontiff in his Apostolic letter of 09 May 2019. Last November, SSVP leaders met in Paris to discuss this matter and suggest universal protocols to be approved at the Assembly in Nairobi, next June. 🌐

3.4. The evils of bureaucracy

Another aspect I have observed is the scale on which Councils are planning for the number of Vincentian events throughout the year. Although it is entirely inappropriate for a Council to have no events during the year, there has to be a balance, avoiding filling the calendar with so many activities that Vincentians do not have time for the basic things in life, quite apart from the works of charity involved in their Conference life.

Today's world is too busy and dynamic, and we all know how this has a serious impact on the daily

routine of Vincentians, especially those who live in major urban centres. Leaders need to “slow down” a little, in planning annual events, taking into account the real need and effectiveness of each event or meeting, because these activities do not always produce the desired results, and end up detaching the member from their family life, and from the moments of rest and relaxation that are recommended. After all, we are all volunteers. Too many training sessions, meetings, events and courses, even though worthwhile and well-intentioned, can also be harmful to our SSVP.

Another topic to consider is bureaucracy which floods the daily life of the SSVP in many parts of the world. Ozanam’s words, “I would like to surround the world in a network of charity”¹⁸ are very well-known. But he also feared that the Society would become one great bureaucracy¹⁹. Are our Councils aware of this?

Sometimes it may require some intervention, in supporting works, and in Councils which have moved away from their mission or from fulfilment of their legal and regulatory requirements. This often painful process must be carried out with extreme love and care, listening to those involved and analysing the best options for resolving the problems found.

Everything can be done to improve the way the SSVP is managed, but always with harmony, warmth, charity and respect for those who have gone before us. Letting go of one’s own opinion - as Vincentian tradition teaches - is essential for maintaining a healthy environment within the Society. 🌐

3.5. The electoral dilemma

As regards elections in Councils and Conferences, we have seen some inappropriate behaviour from several leaders who do everything they can to remain in position, or seek alliances to

¹⁸ In fact, Ozanam said “embrace France in a network of charity”. But it is appropriate and understandable to replace “France” with “the whole world”, in the global system in which we live today.

¹⁹ Reflecting on the SSVP, Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam wrote to his fiancé Amélie: “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. And especially to forget the humble simplicity which has presided over our coming together from the beginning, which makes us love obscurity without cultivating secrecy, and will perhaps win us our ultimate expansion. For God is especially pleased 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 to Amélie Soulacroix, 01 May 1841). {translation taken from https://via.library.depaul.edu/ozanam_law/1/}

¹⁷ All the information about this Vincentian Family Commission can be found at <https://vfhomelessalliance.org>.



nominate people whom they trust as presidents. This un-Vincentian attitude has caused great distress among many people who are disenchanted with the SSVP. I have heard that some Vincentians threaten to leave our Society, if this or that person is elected, which is also inappropriate, because it is the poor who bring us to the Conference, not the elected presidents.

I have heard in various places that the electoral processes have been poorly publicised, or aimed at one person in particular, or that people have been elected who are unprepared, or who do not have the Vincentian charism, which could jeopardise the future of the Society. I have also heard of former presidents or former candidates who do not accept the election results and begin to persecute the elected representatives, creating a climate of instability, animosity and suspicion, not the usual kind of behaviour in our beloved Society. May the good Lord keep us away from such people! There is another problem which has also affected the succession process at various levels: the lack of candidates to take on the role of president in Conferences, Councils and special works. We pray to God that these situations can be quickly improved. I take this opportunity to congratulate all those who put their names forward to the SSVP for any role or activity. May God bless you and reward you! 

3.6. Unjustifiable closure of our Conferences

I am also faced during my trips with Conferences which are closing because of the merger of parishes. As President General, I want to make it very clear that this is not a valid reason to close a Conference. The subject of parish mergers is an unfortunate reality in many parts of the world, but we cannot close our Conferences because of this issue. The structure of service of the SSVP does not necessarily follow the way the Church is organised, or the political-geographical division of a country, as this means we can determine the best way to serve the most vulnerable people.

Even when parishes are merged, our Conferences must remain open, serving the community and those in need, and changing their address if appropriate. As we know, Conferences can operate in other places such as schools, social enterprises, social centres, universities, community centres, Vincentian establishments or even in the homes of the members themselves (under the

auspices of the local Council if necessary). It is also possible for there to be more than one Conference in a parish, as we are creative, and we do not so easily accept the request to close a Conference if our churches merge. 

3.7. Aggregation is essential

Letters of Aggregation for Conferences, and Letters of Institution for Councils, issued by the International Council General, are the visible link between all Vincentian groups and the original intention of the seven founders. There is no greater joy in the life of a Conference than when it receives its Letter of Aggregation. And for me, there is no greater satisfaction than to put my signature onto the Letter. The Council has done everything possible to speed up the process of issuing the Letters, as long as all the data on the forms has been completed correctly. The Permanent Section of the Council General, responsible for analysing and approving the Letters, meets twice a year to consider applications.

Any new Conference which has been operating for at least one year, may require aggregation. Conferences founded many years ago, but which have still not been aggregated to Paris, must immediately contact the president of the Council to which they are linked, to request their Letter of Aggregation. Conferences which are very old, and have lost their Letters, can also request a second copy, which Council General will send. A good Council President never leaves a Conference without its due aggregation. We recommend that before founding new Conferences, attention is given to reactivating Conferences in abeyance; this means that existing, still valid Letters of Aggregation can be used. In every case, requests for Letters of Aggregation must be made formally through Superior or National Councils.

3.8. Role of Vincentian leaders

In general, the misfortunes experienced by the SSVP in every country are fairly similar, since human woes and vanities are also similar. Our challenges everywhere are the same, even though we live with different cultures, environments and languages. My earnest request to Vincentian leaders at all levels is that they are good leaders²⁰, concerned only with

²⁰ Chapter 10 of the book "Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam", written by our fellow member Raymond Sickinger (Indiana, USA, 2017), covering the topic of "servant-



the progress of Conferences, because if they are working well, they will play an extraordinary role in their parish community and in the lives of those most in need of Vincentian help, such as children, teenagers and young people, families, the elderly, those living with disability or sickness, refugees and immigrants, the marginalised, unemployed, those persecuted for their beliefs, and the vulnerable.

Care for Conferences, care for training of Vincentian members, supporting the Holy Church, preparing Councils for the future, strengthening aid work, maintaining and stimulating dialogue, establishing official relations with public authorities, recruiting new members and expanding the ideals of our seven founders, must form the “basic recipe” for any vocational president. So I hope and pray that, in all parts of the world, when elections come round, candidates with these characteristics step forward, bearing no egotism or self-importance, because the mission of every Vincentian should be: to seek our sanctification and practice evangelical charity, for the honour and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 🙏

3.9. True systemic change!

I am a great defender and proponent of the international project the Vincentian Family has been undertaking for several years now, and in many areas, achieving excellent practical results, that of “Systemic Change”²¹. This type of work in my view is a natural complement to charity. Clearly, charity itself is essential in extreme situations of hunger or sickness. But as Antoine-Frédéric said, “charity alone is not enough”. He invites us, with these words, to try to see “the other side of the coin”, which is social justice²².

One of the worst things poverty does is to take away people's hope. People end up thinking that poverty is inexorable: all they can expect in this life. Or in some cases, many people believe - mistakenly - that their distress is God's will. So “Systemic

Change” projects give people new hope, helping them to see it is possible to overcome their misfortunes. “Systemic Change” has a profound belief in the capacity of people to act and bring about change²³. Poverty can be overcome through work, study, initiative and opportunity. Vincentian Conferences can do a great deal through “Systemic Change”, but sometimes our fellow members need good preparation and technical training. There are training courses available on-line, and the Vincentian Family provides them from time to time, available to all. One suggested social project, closely linked to the “Systemic Change” idea, would be the creation of “employment agencies” for the people we help, as the 1845 Manual recommends²⁴.

The “Systemic Change” methodology is fairly simple, since it generates the income which will help people in need to grow in their life. However, we cannot forget that along with economic improvements for our beneficiaries, it is also necessary to make a kind of “Spiritual Systemic Change”, bringing the message of the Gospel to those we visit, so that this poverty - the most important of all - can also be overcome. I recommend that our Conferences should devote much of their energy, plans and efforts to actions linked to “Systemic Change”, to supplement the traditional charitable work they do. 🙏

3.10. Conference meetings

As well as the charitable works which Vincentians undertake for those in need, the most important feature of our beloved Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is the Conference meeting²⁵, a unique opportunity for members to give concrete expression to the joy of being Vincentians. At the meeting we put the Vincentian virtues and the ideals of our founders into practice, strengthening our unity, prayer, generosity and spirituality among members. Attendance at the meeting can be seen not as an obligation but much more as a practical

leaders”, there are several references to this subject. We recommend Vincentian leaders to read this entire chapter.

²¹ Chapter 11 of the book “Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam”, by our fellow member Raymond Sickinger (Indiana, USA, 2017), has much to say on the subject of “Systemic Change”, as well as on the subject of spirituality, friendship and service, the distinctive marks of Vincentian work, as Presidents General teach us in the Circular Letters, written since 1841.

²² “Social order rests on two virtues: justice and charity. [...] Justice has its limits, but charity knows no limits. Moved by the commandment to do to others what we would like them to do to us, and as we desire infinite good, those who love human beings will see that nothing we do is enough until we have sacrificed our lives in doing it, and until we can die saying: I am a worthless servant” (Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, in the book, “Civilization in the 5th century” [originally “Etudes Germaniques”, Chapter I: “Progress in the centuries of decadence”).

²³ For more information on “Systemic Change”, particularly current challenges facing those helped by the SSVP, and other branches of the Vincentian Family, we suggest reading the book “Through the eye of a needle” (London, United Kingdom, 1989), written by Austin Fagan.

²⁴ In the “Manual of the SSVP – 1845”, there are several references from our predecessors to the work that could be achieved, in addition to the usual charitable actions, to help people to escape their poverty. One of these suggestions was precisely that of setting up employment agencies for the unemployed.

²⁵ On the early years of the Conferences of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, we suggest reflecting on the book, “Centenaire de la mort de Frederic Ozanam” [Centenary of the death of Frédéric Ozanam], by Patrick de Manceau (Paris, France, 1953), published by the International Council General.



opportunity for spiritual growth²⁶. The Council General approves two options for holding meetings, as stated clearly in the International Rule: weekly or fortnightly (never monthly). Recently, we have had to refuse requests for some Letters of Aggregation from a country where Conferences were holding monthly meetings, which is contrary to Vincentian tradition. I recommend to my Vincentian brothers and sisters that their meetings should be filled with joy, charity and commitment, because then we will be making great strides on the path of sanctity. Moreover, one possible indicator of the quality of the Conferences' work is the number of families or individuals whose lives have been effectively improved after a period of support, and not just the number of families assisted. 

3.11. Defence of life

In all of the documents of the International Council General, as well as in Circular Letters, we are strong in our defence of the essential teachings of the Catholic Church, especially those relating to the protection of life²⁷. We will continue this way. We are strongly opposed to any attempt to legalise abortion or euthanasia. If Ozanam, Bailly de Surcy and the other founders were alive today, with us, they would all speak out against any threat to these principles, I have no doubt. Our Rule is clear (article 7.2), stating that "Vincentians envision a more just society." "Vincentians listen to the voice of the Church which demands their participation in creating a more equitable and compassionate social order, promoting the culture of life and the civilization of love. In this way, the Society shares the Church's mission to evangelise the world through visible witness, in both actions and words," emphasises the Rule. Hence there can be no doubt about the SSVP's commitment to the Church's doctrine. Our radical engagement with the Church must be combined with help for all those who

experience these dilemmas in their life. Our role as Vincentians is to care for those who are suffering, without judging them. The right to life is the most basic of all human rights, and questions of social justice are the basis on which society is built. May we be always tireless defenders of life in all situations, from conception to natural death. 

3.12. Social networks

The ideal is that we can use social networks²⁸ to empower Vincentian action in the virtual world, and I am very pleased to see that this is growing fast. Our campaigns for collecting donations and training can be expanded with the help of social networks, based on responsible, legitimate criteria, as defined by Council General²⁹. While Vincent de Paul and Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam wrote thousands of letters in their own time to spread their charitable ideals, imagine what they would do today, with the help of modern information and communication tools, such as social networks and the internet.

However, Vincentians have to be careful about the topics discussed and the images sent on social networks, as sometimes anxiety can turn against us. Everyone must be watchful to avoid harming the image of our beloved SSVP.

For instance, political comments³⁰ on social networks, although well-intentioned, can amplify debate, and thus generate more conflict, pushing peace further away each time. Members must be committed to the "culture of peace", which can only be won and built with great tolerance and respect. Vincentians must avoid such political comment, since it does not unite, or seek convergence or reconciliation, and it repeats the same mistakes as those whom we are accusing or criticising.

All this leads to unnecessary harm, which takes a great deal of work for us to put right. Similarly, while we defend a life based on humility and simplicity, we cannot tolerate ostentatious displays of opulence. 

²⁶ "The Mind and Heart of a Vincentian" (London, United Kingdom, 2001) is a scarce work of international Vincentian literature, containing numerous excellent spiritual readings for Conference meetings. The publication was the idea of the National Council of England & Wales, and it is a source of reflections on love in the Christian Church, the need for support for the Church, and how to work harmoniously with it.

²⁷ The topic of the protection of life is a striking feature of the story of Saint Gianna Beretta Molla (1922-1962), called the "martyr of motherly love". Gianna was a member of the SSVP, and the secretary of her Conference. She was canonised by Pope Saint John Paul II, for giving up her life for her unborn child. You can find out more about the life of this amazing woman, an example for today, when civil society relativizes life, by reading the book "Santidad en las Conferencias Vicentinas" [Holiness in Vincentian Conferences] (Avaré, Brazil 2019), by the journalist Gesiel Junior. This publication, sponsored by the International Council General, provides dozens of biographies of SSVP members who have been beatified or canonised. It is well worth reading.

²⁸ On the power of social networks in modern times, we recommend the book "The Square and the Tower" by Niall Ferguson (USA, 2018).

²⁹ At the Plenary Assembly in 2019 (Oporto), Council General adopted two resolutions: "Protocol for institutional use of crowdfunding" and "Ethical protocol for use of social networks". Both protocols can be found on the Council General's website: www.ssvpglobal.org.

³⁰ The focus of Ozanam's politics and social action, as well as the quality of his intellectual work, are set out in the book "Ozanam y la cuestión social del siglo XIX" [Ozanam and the social question of the 19th century] by Álvaro Queiroz (Maceió, Brazil, 2018), recommended for reading, reflection and sharing of ideas.



3.13. Correction within the family

Life is a mixture of successes and upsets, and we Christians are just as susceptible to them as anyone else. Among Vincentians, gentle correction, as in a family, is very important (based on Matt 18:15-22) rather than using other methods which instead of solving problems can end up making them much worse. Such correction within the family is necessary, useful and essential on the road to holiness. Such correction is successful if it is not linked to resentment or pain, or to pride above all, but instead is motivated by love and honesty. We must not act with anger or stress when correcting a brother or sister. How many misunderstandings could be avoided if we dealt with issues in a Christian and family way! Let us ask God for his wisdom, in choosing the right time and path to correct with love.

As the Bible teaches us however, if such correction within the family does not work, call on the brother or sister, together with two other family members. If the problem continues, after this further attempt, involve the spiritual director and the Council officers. Never disclose problems in our Society to people outside the Vincentian environment, or use the media or legal means for this. There are ways of resolving everything among ourselves, as a family. Do not allow gossip to destroy the reputation of good people, because they can never explain their own version to others. We can all make mistakes, and also repent of our mistakes. So let us be just and compassionate among ourselves, Vincentians, before taking any extreme measures. Forgiveness is also the inalienable mark of the Christian. 

3.14. Current problems

As Christians and Vincentians, we are called to holiness, and above all, to live out this holiness³¹ in the world. We cannot ignore today's problems³², many of which derive from the moral crisis in which

³¹ "The Vincentian Family Tree" (Chicago, USA, 1993), written by Sister Betty Ann McNeil (Daughter of Charity), is a book giving biographies of numerous saints from the Vincentian Family, by branch and by country. It is an essential read for all SSVP members, especially all Vincentians in the Family.

³² The article entitled "Clamando por la igualdad en Chile" [Crying out for equality in Chile], by the former Mexican president Jorge Castañeda, in the 12 November 2019 issue of the "New York Times", provides a clear and masterly account of some of the reasons for population movements caused by political, economic, employment and social changes which have affected many areas of the world. We recommend reading this piece, which will provide a critical view of the world today, and the dissatisfaction of citizens asking for reforms, especially at times of disillusion. We in the SSVP, whose motto is "serving in hope", have to continue calling for better times for those who need help.

we find ourselves. The question of migration and refugees for instance takes up much of the news, demands government resources and the efforts of the United Nations (UN). As the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, we are presently working in this social field, collaborating effectively in many parts of the world, providing housing and work for people who have been forced to leave their countries, fleeing economic crisis, religious persecution, hunger or war. "The Lord protects the stranger", says Psalm 145.

Another current issue is that of political protest, taking place in various parts of the world, when citizens go out into the streets to express their discontent with the authorities and with social inequalities. Vincentians have to consider how best to behave with regard to such action, since sometimes there are partisan or ideological interests behind these apparent social movements. Vincentians should also consider environment problems and climate change because ultimately, if we do not care for our environment, we are offending God who gave us the Earth for our livelihood. Poverty also increases as environmental conditions get worse. We can work with those we are assisting to try and avoid wasting water, and to dispose properly of solid waste, as an example of simple means Conferences can adopt at times of personal contact with those most in need. 

3.15. The value of former leaders among our members

Membership of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is a true gift from God, a great mission and a huge responsibility which the Holy Spirit has entrusted to us. And service in the Society's leadership is even more significant.

The role of any president, whether of a Conference, Council or social project, is of vital importance for the proper conduct of Vincentian works, as are the very important roles of secretaries, treasurers and vice-presidents, along with department coordinators and managers of other special tasks within the SSVP.

Similarly, we must never forget the former leaders, who are people of vital importance to guide and support the current leaders, so they can properly fulfil the official role they now provide in



Vincentian affairs, in the best way possible, to “make fewer mistakes” (as Ozanam once said³³).

A good former leader is someone who helps solve problems, taking on the job of primary adviser, giving an opinion about various matters when invited to do so. The profile of a good former leader is someone who prays for the present leaders, asking the intercession of the Holy Spirit for them to lead the Vincentian work well.

A good former leader must be discreet, mild, gentle and above respectful, never becoming involved in conflict. The spirit of reconciliation must be the keynote of a former leader, who should place their talents at the service of the organisation.

A good former leader must be a herald of fairness, an example of those with most experience, a disciple of understanding and gentleness, reflecting Vincentian virtues when they seem eclipsed by evil. The former leader must be skilful, supporting the present Vincentian leaders when they suffer from pressure, criticism or malicious, false and upsetting comments.

A good former leader is someone who helps, builds, combines, protects, relieves crises and improves shared results, in the name of something much greater than personal interest or vanity. The good former leader must focus their energy and experience in those areas which truly unite us and make us stronger to serve those in need.

A good former leader seeks unity; rejects division; guarantees solidarity; cooperates and collaborates. They are called by God to act as a “diplomat of reconciliation”. At the same time, a good former leader must not stay silent, but above all must be aware of their role as guide and motivator of current leaders, staying away from conflict which generates unnecessary harm. The former leader, given their importance in the structure of the SSVP, must be a catalyst in problem-solving. I ask God for this. 🙏

3.16. Prayer and spirituality

It is well-known that members of Vincentian Conferences are people of value, seeking to transform the social situation through charitable work which can help brothers and sisters in need to

³³ See for instance, the letter Ozanam wrote to Emmanuel Bailly de Surcy, first President General of the SSVP: “You got us used to seeing you as the meeting point, the adviser and friend of young Christians; your previous kindnesses gave us the right to rely on your future kindnesses; those you gave to me led me to hope for similar ones for my friends” (Letter to Emmanuel Bailly de Surcy, 03 November 1834).

overcome their distress, winning a better life for themselves. This praiseworthy action cannot be reduced to mere social activism, nor simply to giving material goods, clothing, food, medicine and household equipment.

This is all essential, and we must never stop this kind of assistance while there is one person without hope. But we cannot ignore the spiritual aspect³⁴ of our Society, both in terms of evangelising the people we help, and in the spiritual development³⁵ of our fellow members on their path to Heaven³⁶.

Daily and community prayer, attendance at Mass, reading and reflection on the Gospel, a full sacramental life and the search for salvation must be at the centre of the concerns of every member, as our founders taught us. Works of mercy are a natural way of expressing this true “spiritual immersion” in the Lord. Reconciling these two aspects (material and spiritual) is vital in reaching our goals on this earth.

So I encourage all Vincentians around the world to have more trust in Divine Providence, and ask God to inspire them in resolving conflict and overcoming problems. Let us place our future, the future of the SSVP and the future of those we serve through Vincentian charity, in the hands of God. May we speak with greater kindness, friendship, social justice, warmth and love among the children of God. May we be a light to all, as our Lord Jesus Christ asks us. Conferences will prosper if the spiritual life of their members is strong and exemplary. 🙏

3.17. Centenary of independence

In 2020, we will celebrate the centenary of the Vatican declaration, signed by Pope Benedict XV, that grants full independence to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. This is called the “Vatican’s Corrientes Decision” of 13 November 1920.

The statement was issued for a formal enquiry sent to the Vatican by the bishop of Corrientes in Argentina, in order to resolve an ownership dispute

³⁴ *We are always finding new and fascinating aspects of Ozanam. The book “Federico Ozanam” (Oporto, Portugal, 1994), by our fellow member Alberto Filgueira Gomes, presents a pious Ozanam, a frequent communicant, who used to spend at least 30 minutes every day in prayer and meditation before going to his daily work. We recommend this book.*

³⁵ *As regards Vincentian spirituality, a very worthwhile book for reflection on well-written articles is entitled “Laicado Vicenciano para el Tercer Milenio” [Vincentian Laity in the Third Millennium] (CEME, Salamanca, Spain, 2003).*

³⁶ *To learn more about divine mercy, through key Biblical passages for the Vincentian charism (such as the parable of the Good Samaritan and others) we suggest reading the book “Barmhartige Liefde” [Loving Mercy] (Netherlands, 2017) by brother Wim Verschuren, CMM (a branch of the Vincentian Family).*



over a property between the SSVP Conference and the local church.

After examining the facts in the legal process, the Vatican took the following position: "In addition to ecclesiastical organisations in the strict sense, set up or led by ecclesiastical authority, there are also other groups of faithful, created for a pious end, but established under the governance and power of the laity, and merely approved or recommended by the ecclesiastical authority. But aside from this case, when an organisation does not owe its existence to the Church, nor is recognised for legal purposes by the Church, neither can it be governed or led by the ecclesiastical authority, but only by the lay people specified in its own statutes. In these associations, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, or Vincentian Conferences, stands out for its renown and its example".

It should be noted that official recognition by the Catholic Church of the SSVP occurred much earlier, on 12 August 1845, through the Brief of Pope Gregory XVI, who approved the Society's methods and objectives and defined the various indulgences granted to members.

Based on these statements by the Church, the SSVP's International rule establishes the following: "The Society is legally autonomous as to its existence, constitution, organisation, rules, activities and internal government. Members freely choose their own officers and manage the Society's activities and assets with full autonomy, in accordance with their own Statutes and the legislation in effect in each country." 

4. International Year of Félix Clavé

As the sixteenth President General, I am pleased to tell you that 2020 is the INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF FELIX CLAVÉ, one of the seven friends who, in 1833³⁷, came together to form our beloved Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

Like the years of Bailly de Surcy (2017), Lallier (2018) and Lamache (2019) we will motivate and encourage all members of SSVP, throughout the world, to find out more about the life of Clavé, the least known of the seven founding fathers of our Society. 

4.1. Literary competition

³⁷ We were not there in 1833, but God allowed us to be here today in 2020, with our mission to follow in the footsteps of the seven founders, growing and developing the charitable work of the SSVP, guided by the light of the Holy Spirit.

On **8 February 2020**, the International Council General will launch the fourth International Literary Competition "The First Conference - Félix Clavé". This will reward the essay or essays which offer new or little-known details of the personal, professional, Vincentian and family life of Clavé, as well as his contribution to the establishment of the first Conference, and the SSVP's expansion around the world.

The Board of the International Council General is always very aware of the importance of the seven founders in the history of the SSVP, not just in the life of Blessed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, our greatest example, whose canonisation process³⁸ is well advanced, but also in the contribution the other pioneers have made to the Church, to those in need and to humanity.

The International Council General believes that the International competition "The First Conference - Felix Clavé" will be as successful as the previous ones, which gave prizes to Vincentians from various parts of the world. This is exactly what we wanted: a greater and better understanding of the life and work of our founders, their qualities and virtues, as well as their flaws. This is one of the main objectives we hope to achieve in the service of the presidency of the Council General.

As stated in the rules which will be published on Council General's web page (www.ssvpglobal.org) in the next few weeks, and in accordance with the guidelines used for the previous competitions, money prizes will be awarded³⁹ both to the winning writers as well as to their Conferences. We are sure that the academic work on Clavé will be just as valuable as those on Bailly de Surcy, Lallier and Lamache have been, 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 reflection pieces on the dominant role of Clavé in the process of founding the SSVP, stimulating the study of his life and work, in personal, professional, academic and Vincentian terms, contributing to Council General's implementation of the 2020 International Themed year.

³⁸ For more details about Ozanam's beatification and canonisation process, we recommend the book "Federico Ozanam: una cronología" by Father Manuel Mendes (Oporto, Portugal, 2019), which gives a timeline for the process and the present situation.

³⁹ 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.



Council General suggests that on **8 December 2020**, the closing date of the “International Year of Félix Clavé”, a thanksgiving Mass is celebrated in all parishes around the world, for the special intention of the memory of the founder Pierre-Emmanuel-Félix Clavé. Also, on **9 November 2020**, the anniversary of Clavé’s death, Conferences should recall his story, reading passages on him as the spiritual reading at Vincentian meetings.

The present board of Council General is continuing to work to ensure that the seven founders are better known, loved and admired, because the SSVP’s foundation was a collective action, 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 Clavé?

Pierre-Emmanuel-Félix Clavé was born on 8 July 1811 in the south of France, probably in the Hautes-Pyrénées, though some books say he was born in Toulouse. He moved to Paris in 1831, staying there until 1838. He was a very cultured and studious man, multi-lingual and belonging to social circles which included French notables, celebrities and authorities. At this point he fell in love with a girl who could not reciprocate his affection, as she considered Clavé was socially beneath her. This rejection of his love caused him great heartache.

Clavé was a close friend of Bailly de Surcy, Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam and the other students who belonged to the Conferences of History and Charity, and who shortly after founded the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. He also founded a Vincentian Conference in the district where he lived in Paris (St Philippe du Roule).

In 1838 he moved to Algeria (then a French colony in Africa) and tried to form a Conference in the capital of the country, but without success, despite the efforts of Ozanam and the local bishop. In 1839, he travelled to México to work with his Mexican brother-in-law, Manuel Zulayeta, and his sister, Petronille Mary-Louise Céline. He lived there for several years, during which time he became fluent in the local language, speaking and writing it perfectly.

Clavé’s reputation and personal life were seriously tarnished by the famous “Case of Mme Lafarge”, which was widely reported in the media at the time. Madame Lafarge was an unfaithful Frenchwoman, who poisoned her husband to

inherit his money, and stole valuable jewels which belonged to a friend. In attempting to prove herself innocent, Marie Lafarge invented various fantastic stories which involved several people including Félix Clavé, whose name was mistakenly included in the criminal proceedings. He was never accused of anything, but Mme Lafarge’s defence lawyer took advantage of Clavé’s humble position by making aggressive speeches and false accusations which affected his credibility.

Although he had nothing to do with the criminal action, from which the judge in the case absolved him entirely, Clavé’s reputation was damaged and his life seriously affected by this. His physical and mental health deteriorated and were seriously harmed by the “Madame Lafarge case”.

He married Marie-Louise Sorg on 11 February 1847, in Paris, at the church of Notre Dame de Loreto at 19 rue Châteaudun (Paris 9e). The couple had no children. In the last years of his life, given his mental state, Clavé’s wife had to place him in a rehabilitation clinic in the Pyrenees for treatment of his nervous problems.

He died in the city of Pau at 42 years of age, on 9 November 1853, the same year that the SSVP lost another of its seven founders: Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, age 40. Clavé was buried in Pau, in the south of France, near Lourdes. The Board of the International Council General will visit his tomb, God willing, in September this year.

After many years’ searching, we have found an image of our founder Clavé, thank God. A Brazilian member, searching the Internet, located a photo of our co-founder, which has now been widely distributed and appreciated by all the Conferences, Councils and other groups of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. With this image, the Council General can complete its photo gallery of the founders, and finally put to rest the story that there were no images of Clavé because of the legal case in which he was involved.

Clavé was the author of several publications and articles, including a poetry book, and a book entitled “Histoire de Pie IX” written in 1848 (a rare copy in Spanish is held by Council General). The book provides behind-the-scenes accounts of Vatican diplomacy, mentioning potential crises resolved by Pius IX’s political skills and the doctrinal changes the Pope made in the life of the Church. This publication by Clavé is a wonderful example of Catholic and Vincentian writing, still little known.



Félix Clavé was an honourable person, and never abandoned his faith, despite all the insults and slander he suffered. He will always be remembered in the history of the SSVP as one of its seven founders. Without him, the SSVP would not be the same. Today's Vincentians will be surprised at the biography of Félix Clavé, because of the great distress he experienced, and the many crosses he had to bear at various times in his life, in this false, selfish, unjust and throwaway world. Briefly, he suffered what today we would call intimidation, as well as being a victim of “fake news”, discrimination and social rejection. He was a worthy man who offered his suffering to God for the honour of the Lord. 🙏

5. Conclusion

Dear Vincentians, the Circular Letter is a document through which the President General is happy to speak directly, without intermediaries, to all the members and volunteers at the grassroots, setting out his thoughts, reflecting on Vincentian practice, suggesting changes and renewal of our attitudes.

It is always good from time to time to reassess our work, think about the future and redesign our strategies.

You might not agree with everything I have written in this Circular Letter, but one thing at least is certain: you know how the President General of the SSVP thinks.

For my final words, I would like to talk about the importance of joy among us, and the Vincentian smile. The smile is the doorway into the soul. So no matter what is involved, the ideal attitude is always to be positive, warm, flexible, friendly, and smiling. A smile opens doors.

And for us Vincentians, this advice is important in three ways. We may never undertake any charitable act or work with a bitter, sad or discouraged heart. The smile is the first step we have to take to allow communication to flow, because it contributes to the effectiveness of charity. “Rejoice with those who rejoice” (Romans 12:15). A smile is the key to good communications.

The second reason to smile is that it neutralizes any antipathy, unnecessary conflict, unwanted breakdowns, bitterness and falsehood, because it disarms the other person who certainly did not expect such kindness and warmth. “Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of

joy” (Psalm 126:2). It is well-known that smiles are contagious.

In the third place, the Vincentian smile is essential to create a friendly atmosphere among members of our Society at Conference meetings and events, in our work and in Councils. A smile is also essential when welcoming new members, visitors and priests, and above all in personal contact with those in need (during home visits for instance). The smile is the essential feature of a good welcome.

The world is still bitter, hard, ungrateful and unjust. So a light smile, simple but honest, is enough to break the ice and cope with sorrow. A real smile builds bridges and brings hearts together. The smile destroys evil; overcomes indifference; curbs disdain; buries prejudice; brings about reconciliation; calms suffering hearts; and satisfies fully those who use it. A smile is a sign of joy. A smile is the trademark of a Christian.

So let us be enthusiasts for smiling, and stimulate kindness constantly in our Vincentian environment, particularly at Conference meetings. This sign marks us out as Christians and Vincentians!

Quoting from a piece written recently by a Portuguese member, I ask everyone to reflect on her poem in their Conferences:

- *While there is one person who cannot have a dignified life,*
- *While there is a single hungry child,*
- *While there is one person without work,*
- *While there is one person who thinks suicide is their only choice,*
- *While there is only one lonely, elderly person,*
- *Whenever there is a single patient without medical care,*
- *While there is a single person who is a victim of injustice,*
- *The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, with its Conferences and members, has a reason for being.*
- *Because for us, poverty has so many faces!*

I ask the good Lord to bless us and protect us from harm, taking care of every Vincentian and their families, and especially their health. In the same way, I ask the blessed Virgin to bless those we help, the elderly and children.



16th President General

Stay strong in the wonderful work you are doing for the world! For all this, with Jesus Christ and Mary, through the hands of Saint Vincent and Rosalie Rendu⁴⁰, Clavé and Ozanam, I thank you for your attention, and leave you with my fraternal affection, always serving with hope. May 2020 be a year full of success in our Vincentian Conferences, Councils and special works. 

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



⁴⁰ Some interesting aspects of the life of Blessed Rosalie Rendu (Daughter of Charity) and the co-founder Auguste Le Taillandier can be found in the book "I santi della Famiglia Vincenziana" [The Saints of the Vincentian Family] by Father Giuseppe Guerra, CM, postulator for the cause for the canonisation of Frédéric Ozanam.