



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

*A necessary reflection on the challenges of these times, some
educational and social aspects of Vincentian action.*

2022 - International Themed Year of *Pierre-Auguste Le Taillandier*

Paris, 31st January 2022

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 alongside us, particularly for those in need whom our Society helps, whether in special works or in the action of the Conferences.

I am very pleased to be writing to you all again, members of the Vincentian Conferences around the world, and the many branches of the Vincentian Family, for the seventh time since I was elected the 16th President General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, with this Circular Letter for 2022, the themed year of our co-founder, Pierre-Auguste Le Taillandier.

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 support in improving the work of the Conferences, special works Social and Councils. Indeed, the Presidents General's letters are very valuable training & formation materials for all our members.

It is a very special, unique and magic moment for me to write the Circular Letter. It involves days and days of inspiration, consultation, prayer and drafting texts, which are closely intertwined with the wishes, longings and requests of the SSVP for the world. Some content comes from the connections I make during international journeys, but, above all, it comes from the free, fraternal and democratic dialogue I have with the members.

Writing the Circular letter is a gift from God in my life. Knowing that this text will be remembered, after many years, even though it is a snapshot of the present time, and that it will be used for research by many people, is a huge honour and privilege. Weighing my words, rewriting the sentences over and over, criticising myself freely, in order to create a solid, but also light text, whose balance is not always easy to find.

I hope that everyone can reflect on the chapters of this circular letter, and provide comments, criticisms and suggestions by e-mail: cgi.circularletter@gmail.com. Enjoy your reading! 



2. Council General is Moving Forward

2.1. Despite the pandemic

As we know, humanity has lived through difficult times due to the terrible effects of the international health crisis, with millions of human lives lost. The pandemic is not just a health problem but has also had a serious social and economic impact (increased prices for goods and energy, generating inflation). Many people have lost their jobs and their hopes. We are all suffering, to a greater or lesser degree, especially those most in need; this includes ourselves, members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. We must never forget that, at the beginnings of our Society, the dear founders faced similar epidemics, and were able to keep the flame of charity alight, despite all adversity¹. Remember the cholera epidemic in Europe (1827-1835) and the Spanish flu (1918-1920), times when the SSVP acted with energy to help the sick, especially among the poorest people.

It is clear that the current restrictions have led to a new way of living. We all have to learn again how to live, to live together and survive. Civil society has embraced remote working and education. Personal relationships have been affected, and mental health problems are multiplying. People are learning to use new technologies to stay in touch and connected. On the other hand, the poorest people, without access to computers, mobile phones and the internet, are excluded from this process. In the coming months, inflation is expected to return, with chronic shortage of food, a fall in economic indicators and reduced donations to organisations like ours.

Inequality and deprivation have increased, among nations and within them. Economic warfare around vaccines has made it clear that while some can celebrate without masks, most of the world is still waiting for its first doses². Hunger, vulnerability and uncertainty have increased. Despite everything, Vincentians have been very active and creative, seeking to help those suffering in these dark times. There have been numerous initiatives, on all continents, social projects and local campaigns, led entirely by the SSVP. Council General itself has sent over 300,000 euros to some 70 countries to help the fight against the pandemic. There have also been acts of piety, prayer and devotion, also marks of the identity of our Society. 

¹^[1]There were several pandemics in Europe during the 19th century, mainly cholera and typhoid. France was particularly badly hit by the second cholera pandemic (1827 to 1835). This, as we know, coincided with the date the first Conference of Charity was founded (1833), which shortly after became known as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SSVP). It is not unlikely that this health emergency influenced the foundation of the SSVP. In the midst of the cholera epidemic, it was probably one of the aspects defining the efforts to do something for those most in need, leading difficult lives in Paris. More information is available in the article "The first members of the SSVP and the pandemics", by Spanish member Javier Chento, available at <https://famvin.org/en/2020/08/31/the-first-members-of-the-society-of-saint-vincent-de-paul-and-the-pandemics/?noredirect=en-US>.

²^[2]The distribution of vaccines throughout the world provides a picture of the deep inequalities we experience around the globe. While vaccine coverage in the most developed countries exceeds 50% of the population, in African countries for instance it hardly reaches 10% (December 2021). More information at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/12/1108622>.



2.2. A year of challenges and opportunities

Despite the international health crisis, the past year, dedicated to the co-founder Jules Devaux, was fruitful in terms of successes and activities, both in-person and on-line. As the year comes to an end, we are preparing a report providing a very interesting overview of the activities of Council General over this period. With the invaluable support of the Superior Councils, the International Board and the International Office staff have been able to make some major progress, which I will mention briefly in this chapter.

In terms of training and formation, we have several outstanding items, such as the publication of the 2021 Circular letter; the launch of *Vincentian Chronicles* (volume 5); two webinars were held on the pandemic, poverty, and future; discovery of a book about poetry, written by our co-founder Félix Clavé; promotion of various training courses for all members and those at the International Structure; organization of “The First Conference” international literary contest about Jules Devaux; and visit to places connected by co-founder Félix Clavé.

As regards spiritual growth, the Council General instituted the fast day on the 23rd of each month, as part of the campaign for the canonisation of Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam. The “Ozanam Novena” was also launched, held from 1 to 9 September each year, prepared by the French member Philippe Menet, to whom we are grateful for this initiative. The canonization process is in full swing, with the medical investigation of the case under examination, and Fr Giuseppe Guerra (CM) following it very closely. The “Christmas Message” video was recorded at the end of the year, addressed to all Vincentians around the world.

In terms of administration and management, Council General has set up the new “Governance Department”, and is also initiating studies into the adoption of best practice for Risk Management. Two further documents were completed during the year, which are very useful for carrying out international activities: the updated “Terms of Reference” (for all international departments and posts), and the review of the Strategic Plan (for the period remaining to the end of this term of office in September 2023). Two new employees were taken on to strengthen the work of the head office. The membership commissioner has worked very hard, with some 20 cases to deal with that were not resolved at national level. And in April, God willing, we hope to open the new head office in Paris, with a lovely religious ceremony and the opening of the “Ozanam Historic Space”.

We are seeing many developments in the area of communications. As well as the weekly news update on the Council General website (www.ssvpglobal.org), three issues of the digital magazine “Ozanam Network” were published, and two Talk Shows broadcast with the President General, as well as completion of the International Logo Commission's study and analysis, the recommendations from which will be discussed in 2022 and 2023. During the year, dozens of interviews were given to communications media, and we took part in radio, television and social network programmes. Another standout item in terms of information was the publication of two official communiqués by the Council, one against euthanasia, the other on the ending of nuclear warfare.



In September, in Madrid (Spain), Council General held its annual meeting, in hybrid form, and awarded the “Charity in Hope” medal to the Pontifical Council “Aid to the Church in Need”, as well as signing a collaborative agreement with MISEVI, Vincentian Lay Missionaries. At the same meeting, three manuals were launched: “Founding of Youth Conferences at Universities and Colleges”, “World Day of the Poor”, and “Operational procedures of the SSVP Plus Project”. At the beginning of this year, we are also publishing the final version of the “Protocol for Saving the most vulnerable people”, for use by Superior Councils.

We have made a great deal of progress in the field of youth, starting with the completion of the census, which provided the excellent statistic that 30% of our SSVP membership is formed of young people (those under 35 years of age). The International Vice-presidency for this sector has been busy, initiating various on-line programmes, particularly the “Salamanca Digital”, which brought together the participants from the 2018 meeting and the current national youth coordinators. Two letters were published for young people on 4 July, as well as the launch of the “International Friendship Network” project. The Song Festival “The Seven Founders” for young people was also organized, for the French, English and Italian languages, with great success.

We should not forget the important dates and festivals celebrated around the world by Council General: **July 4th** (SSVP Youth Day), **July 21st** (Founding of Council General) and **August 14th** (International Day for Female Members)³. Five ordinary Board meetings were also held, along with numerous training and formation days and working meetings for the International Territorial Vice-presidents. I had the joy of receiving an honorary citizenship award in Taubaté (Brazil), and attending the solemn “Vincentians’ day” gathering in Brasilia at the local Parliament.

As regards events and international participation, the second year of the pandemic continued to have negative effects since restrictions made attendance at various events very difficult. Nonetheless it was possible to visit seven countries (Gibraltar, Mexico, Spain, Brazil, Portugal, France and Paraguay). The “SSVP Plus” project successfully brought the SSVP to Cap Verde. At the United Nations, Council General took part, virtually or in-person, at various session to discuss the environment, poverty, homelessness and migration. As regards the Vatican, I was appointed a member of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, and the Council played an active role at various meetings on topics relating to childhood, migrants and refugees.

Relations with the Vincentian Family, as always, have been exceptional. As well as the annual payment made by Council General to the International Office in Philadelphia, a significant contribution was made to renovate the conference room at the Mother House, which will now be called “Ozanam Room”. The Vincentian Family published a communiqué supporting the canonisation of Ozanam, and another at the suggestion of the SSVP about the importance of supplying vaccines to the poorest countries. Council General took part in all the meetings promoted by the Vincentian Family in 2021, particular those of the

³In honour of Amélie Soulacroix Ozanam, the devoted wife of Ozanam, born on August 14th, 1820. In May 2022, the great writer Matthieu Bréjon will publish a book about Amélie.



International Executive Committee, as well as at various on-line events for training, spirituality and the “13 Houses” campaign, which addresses the issue of homelessness.

The figures relating to international solidarity are impressive. The International Commission for Aid and Development (CIAD) sent 350,000 euros to 30 countries, for humanitarian aid (natural disasters) and social projects. On Council General’s website, the CIAD has created a section called “Appeal of the Month”, which has received many financial donations for the initiatives highlighted. The International Twinning Section has provided donations for over 50 countries, providing resources totalling 1 million euros.

So, despite the restrictions imposed by the health crisis, it is clear that all these activities and initiatives have been completed, for which we thank God for the strength, courage and energy which keep Council General always active and working in its charitable actions. We take this opportunity to thank Father Andrés Motto, CM, SSVP International Spiritual Adviser, for his kind moral and religious counsel during this time. 🙏

2.3. Upcoming Elections

In September this year, the SSVP's International Council General will start the succession process for voting in a new President General, the seventeenth in the history of the Society, who will be elected at the Assembly in Rome, in June 2023. The announcement will be published as stated in the Rule 10 months before the election, setting out the rules for countries to submit names of members who could exercise the function of President General. The Council General and the person of the President General are of vital importance, as we all know, for the whole of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. So I thank God for the opportunity I have had to provide this service. In this role, I can see how challenging and complex the task is.

According to the Rule of the Confederation, there are two very objective criteria (articles 3.5 and 3.7) in the election of a president general: the Vincentian life, which is demonstrably unbroken, and the age limit. Many people may be surprised at this, and may ask: is that all? I also believe that these two conditions alone are not enough for us to elect the Vincentian who will lead the SSVP for six years. 🙏

2.4. Ideal Conditions for Electing a Good President General

In my humble view, considering the profile of the President Generals who preceded me, I believe that some further subjective but essential criteria could be added, so that the election results in a name who brings honour to the position, avoiding the election of interested parties or people with ulterior motives (political interests, for example). We need candidates ready to pursue the progress achieved by Council General since 1839.

It is recommended that the president general should have leadership skills and abilities. Our Confederation is formed of 153 countries (and is growing daily), so the leader needs to have a shared vision to be forward-looking, and lead the “army of charity”, which the SSVP represents. It is recommended that the President General has the charism and sympathy to bring the message of charity, service, love and friendship wherever it is found, especially on missionary journeys.

It is recommended that the President General should have ideas for improvements, to optimise international strategic planning, focussed on strategic and institutional



areas. These ideas will form the candidate's initial working programme (like a platform), which can then be turned into programmes, projects and initiatives.

It is recommended that the President General should be able to communicate in languages other than their mother tongue. These days, in a connected, globalised world, it is practically impossible for someone not to speak other languages. This ability greatly assists situations during meetings and negotiations, seeking consensus, in audiences with authorities and representatives of other social and political organisations, on visits to countries and the relationship with the Church. The cost of interpreters and translations is also currently fairly high.

It is recommended that the President General should have previous administrative experience. President of a Conference, leading a Social Work or a Council would provide useful experience to help avoid mistakes in the administrative management of the International Council General. This condition will also help when choosing members of the board and all the departments of the International Structure.

And finally, perhaps the most important: in the spiritual aspects, the President General should be a true messenger of the virtues (Vincentian, cardinal and theological), protector of the family (when the world is destroying it daily through the communications media), defender of life (against abortion and euthanasia), messenger of peace and harmony, and against anti-Christian ideologies, supporting the Vincentian Family and the Holy Church at all times, especially in the most difficult moments. Charity is a consequence of our faith.

In any case, bearing in mind the objective and subjective criteria described above, it is God who will choose the next President General. So He will enable those elected to ensure their term of office is successful, for the good of those in need, and for the good of the SSVP as a whole. We must pray even harder, for the Holy Spirit to elect people who are truly called to the lofty mission we have ahead of us. Let us pray to Our Lord Jesus Christ for candidates to come forward with these characteristics, and so honour the legacy of all the President Generals up to now! 🙏

2.5. A Message for Young People

The presence of children and youth at the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is a blessing for us all. I never tire of acknowledging the value of the presence of young people in Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, since its wonderful foundation in 1833 to the present day⁴. We always recall the legacy of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, and in his memory we created the SSVP International Day for Youth, and established the Special Collection for Youth, which will be taken again this year.

The crisis caused by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 was a challenge for us all, especially the young. However, it was they who, in many parts of the world, kept Vincentian Conferences operating, serving the poor with dedication and commitment. I have no words to thank the Vincentian Youth for this gesture of love for the Society and those most in need. You are most important for us, through home visits and the works of charity our Society does, since the vulnerable really need Vincentian help and the courage of the young.

⁴Some years after the foundation of the first Conference of Charity, Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam encouraged SSVP members to care for young people, for the good of the poor and the continuation of the Society's mission: "While it is useful for young people to come together to find friends and family, it is vital for the Society to recruit members among the young. The Society has existed now for fourteen years: it must not age like its founders, and charity must become a matter of habit. Youth is useful for its boldness, including its recklessness, for the new ideas it brings, for the works which we had never considered." (Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, 1847)



Know that in me you have a great supporter and defender. I joined the SSVP when I was 15, and so I entirely understand the concerns and challenges of young people. There will always be room for you in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and especially in Council General. And to keep this commitment I have made for youth initiatives, I am pleased to announce that in 2022 we will launch an international competition for youth in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. The winners, one from each Territorial Vice-presidency, will receive their costs to attend the two youth events in August 2023 in Lisbon (Portugal): the Vincentian Family International Youth meeting, and World Youth Days (with Pope Francis).

I am now speaking directly to the presidents of Superior Councils: we need to organise a national Youth Committee so we can give more visibility to the work Vincentian youth carries out in all countries. We have to give unlimited support to young people; develop projects and programmes especially for them, seek creative ways for training them, invest in the future of young people and open up more spaces for them to take decisions within the SSVP at national level, among other means. It is essential to listen to young people, acknowledge their suggestions, accept their ideas and implement their initiatives.⁵ 

3. Recommendations to Vincentians

In this chapter, I will list some situations which were sent to the International Council General by members around the world, via the various channels available, including that of membership commissioner, created to help Superior Councils resolve problems which may arise between members and other collaborators. The comments and recommendations noted below also come from my own observations during the missionary journeys I make and direct contacts I have with the members.

Such matters are worth everyone's consideration so that our work with those who suffer can be continually improved. The ideas and questions raised here are also aimed at telling us how our Councils, Conferences and Social Works develop, and above all about the behaviour of our members. Some of my readers may not agree with some of what I have written, but at least they will know how I am thinking, with all my limitations.

3.1. Observing the Rule and Statutes

Any human organisation, whether public or private, religious or secular, sets rules for the common good and has procedures to be followed in order to ensure that the principles and values which unite them are properly respected. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is no different. Our founding fathers, in the early years of the existence of the Conferences of Charity, inspired by God, began a process of structuring which culminated in the publication of the first Rule in December 1835.⁶

⁵“Youth is useful for its boldness, including its recklessness, for the new ideas it brings, for the works which we had never considered” (Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, 1847)

⁶ As the organisation grew, a basic direction was needed for meetings and for the actions on which our vocation and charism were founded. The need also arose for the creation of Councils to lead the work of Conferences and enable expansion throughout the world. So an amendment was published to the Rule in 1839, to incorporate the foundation of the Council General, the rules for elections and daily recommendations for the work of charity and the approach of the members, especially the leaders. During the 19th century, the International Rule was twice amended further, in 1850 and 1856, explaining the role of Central and Superior Councils, remaining for many years without further alterations or modifications. At the Plenary Assembly in Paris in 1967, the Council General in Paris (male) and the Council General in Boulogne (female) merged. And shortly after, in 1973, on completion of the Plenary Assembly in Dublin (Ireland), the Rule adopted its modern guise, without however abandoning the fundamentals established by the



Today, the International Rule of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is a solid, broad, youthful document, open to dialogue and permeable to change. The improvements made during these decades did not alter the spirit which moved the seven founders in 1833: the need for prayer (individual and community); personal contact in Vincentian work; our living relationship of brothers and sisters together; the universality of our commitment to service those in need; and our Vincentian vocation.

On occasion, we may criticise, and not agree with some articles in the Rule, or find them overly bureaucratic. This is democratic, and should be seen as natural. What we can never do is fail to fulfil the Rule, or any other regulation which has been approved by Vincentian leaders, specifically to improve management of Conferences, works and Councils. We know that the Rule is not perfect, as we human beings are not perfect. But the Rule is a safe path for us to help us to holiness, humility and charitable service to those who suffer. Above all, the Rule is a path and also a beacon guiding the future of our Society. It specifies the values, mission and vision we want for our Society and its members.

The third President General, Adolphe Baudon, showed his wisdom when he said that, “if a Conference threatens to fail, it is because it has diverged from the Rule; and if it prospers, on the other hand, it can be sure that it is faithfully observing the traditions and practices of the Society”. Many people want to adapt the Rule to their own situation in life, or to resolve some particular, practical situation, but that’s not what it was created for. It is we who must humbly adapt ourselves to the Rule, and follow it without hesitation, because we know that its principles are uplifting. Detachment from one’s own opinions, one of the essentials of Vincentian life, is also expressed by faithful observance of the Rule, since this way we can avoid the standards of the Society being interpreted in different ways. The presence of the Rule guarantees that Superior Councils will develop in harmony and total consistency with the dictates of the Council General, since this was what our founders wanted. The essential role of the Council General is to be the protector of the Rule and guardian of unity within the Confederation.

The existence of statutes, basic requirements, standards and the Rule itself, above all, is intended to make our organisation more fluid, more flexible, dynamic and modern, without the bonds of bureaucracy⁷, hierarchy and excessive regulations, which so annoyed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam (Isaiah 28, 10). The only reason for the Rule's existence is to improve the daily life of Conferences, Social Works and Councils. The Rule only exists in order to serve the poor more lovingly and effectively. It is a great ally in the service of charity: the clearer its principles, the clearer will be its affectionate acceptance by everyone. The hierarchy we have to follow, in observing the Rule, should be the hierarchy of love, adopting an inclusive, conciliatory attitude. Observing the Rule, body and soul, working in harmony with the

seven founders, and the pillars bequeathed by Presidents General via the Circular Letters. The text of the preface to the Rule written by the ninth President General, Pierre Chouard, stands out. In October 2003, in order to give the Society a more universal character, a Plenary meeting was held in Rome (Italy), at which the majority of Superior Councils approved the current version. The 2003 changes transformed the SSVP into a great International Confederation, bringing all the Superior Councils together, establishing a new structure of service within the Council General, and including articles which encouraged association with other organisations. A further amendment was approved in 2016, with slight changes, at the Plenary meeting also in Rome.

⁷ “Only one thing could hinder and destroy us: the alteration of our original (primitive) spirit, the Pharisaism that sounds the trumpet before the people, the exclusive self-esteem which ignores virtue anywhere other than that preferred by the corporate body; excessive practice and rigour, which is translated into laxity and relaxation or a verbal philanthropy more eager to talk than act, or else bureaucratic practices which obstruct our progress, and hinder our workings” (Letter from Frédéric Ozanam to Amélie Soulacroix, 1 May 1841).



precepts of the Church, and based on good organisational practice, is the certain way to ensure an enriching future. 

3.2. The Unhappy Exclusion of Active Members

One of the hardest decisions for me is to confirm the exclusion of members of our Society, after a process carried out at national level. It costs me so much to take this decision! It is always very said to have to exclude any member of our organisation, especially because we all, when we join the SSVP, are driven by the Holy Spirit to undertake works of charity which can help us towards personal holiness, and at the same time serve those who suffer. So in the end, excluding anyone means preventing a Vincentian from achieving these fine and holy objectives.

I know that the Rule and Statutes envisage the possibility of this, but as President General, I would like to call out to Superior Councils: before excluding a member, check if it would be more appropriate to apply alternative penalties, such as a warning, temporary suspension, suspension from positions, or voluntary resignation. In this process, which also takes place in Conferences, Social Works and Councils, I suggest that, before dismissing members, the possibility is considered of a reprimand or temporary suspension. Many cases and conflicts we have seen, in various countries, come from Vincentians who were excluded without due legal process, alleging a lack of defence or some kind of persecution. We have to avoid this, always being charitable towards our companions on the Vincentian path. We can all make mistakes, and we do, of course, have the right to a second chance, as Holy Scripture teaches us when addressing the matter of fraternal correction.⁸

So it's not a matter of escaping from wrongdoing, or being too compassionate to those who do wrong, it's only about being fair to these people, who devote years of their life to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. And in all these situations, there must be no lack of dialogue, conciliation, respect and charity among ourselves. 

3.3. The Outstanding Value of Education

In my talks and presentations, I always include information that UNICEF and UNESCO have published about the value of education in reducing the level of poverty in the world. These United Nations organisations believe that global poverty could be halved if young people could complete at least their secondary education (pre-university level)⁹. This fact indicates that the SSVP has a moral duty to be much more involved in educational projects, in order to help the human race reduce these poor indicators.

How can the SSVP help to improve education around the world? First of all, Conferences could sponsor professional training courses for their beneficiaries, especially the youngest people. Education for work is a sure way to promote the well-being of families we help, cutting their dependency on aid received from Conferences, and contributing to their ultimate release from the vicious cycle of poverty. We can and should in particular invest in

⁸ *In the Bible, we find many examples of people to whom God gave a second chance. Just to mention Jonah, Samson, David, Mark and Peter, among others.*

⁹ *See the article "Global poverty could be cut in half if all adults completed secondary education", published by UNESCO at the following link: <https://en.unesco.org/news/world-poverty-could-be-cut-half-if-all-adults-completed-secondary-education>.*



the fight against digital exclusion, which is one of the chief obstacles today for education and for people's entry into the labour market. For children, nurseries are also an excellent response to this challenge. Any investment in education, from infancy up to university level, is worth making in this struggle for education to reduce poverty and social vulnerability.¹⁰

And we cannot forget that education is one of the five items forming the Vincentian “Systemic Change” project, conceived by the Vincentian Family and also adopted by our Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Through education, people obtain better jobs, which provides them with greater opportunities. With better pay, people eat better, live better and enjoy better health. This is a positive cycle, which starts from the nursery. Congratulations to all Councils and Conferences that maintain schools and nurseries, and which promote any kind of professional training or social project for those they help, just as our predecessors observe in the appendix to the SSVP Manual of 1845. 🌐

3.4. Decision-Making Process

We have noted that some important decisions, taken at the level of the Superior Councils of some of our 153 territories, have been the subject of strong opposition and rejections from the grassroots. Naturally, any decision must be implemented, if our Society is to operate properly.

But this negative reaction is perhaps the result of steps being taken by one or at most two or three people only, without listening to the rest of the board members, or the main leaders within the country. For instance, decisions to close some support works, to expel members, sign agreements or other things, should be shared collegiately, as our founders' wishes. As Ozanam said, in order to make fewer mistakes.¹¹

So I ask you that decisions may be taken once Councils have been duly consulted, that pros and cons are considered beforehand, that those involved are allowed to express themselves, and that charity, harmony and respect might be key to any decision, particularly those involving members, beneficiaries or employees. I make this plea so that the unnecessary conflicts and legal issues which have arisen around the world can be avoided. 🌐

3.5. Conference: a Holy Place

In the last few months, due to the health crisis affecting us all, we have seen how people have taken refuge at home, within their own world, in their own lives, having little or no contact with neighbours. Perhaps fear of death and lack of trust in Divine Providence explain this behaviour. This “shutting up to protect oneself”, while necessary, has consequences. Many people, even now, are only slowly returning to normality, still full of fears and doubts. Many still resist any return to routine activities, such as work or study.

¹⁰ *We should not forget that from the start, training was one of the favourite tasks of our first members. Ozanam was convinced of the need to include training for factory workers, to help them escape the cycle of poverty and ensure a better future for themselves and their families. Frédéric also devoted much of his own life to education, since as we know, he was a teacher for most of his adult life, first in Lyon (where he gave classes in Commercial Law), and then at the Sorbonne in Paris (first as an assistant professor, and then as Professor in Foreign Literature).*

¹¹ *“Leaders must be holy. First, they will commit fewer mistakes; then, they will tolerate attacks more calmly.”*



Just as everyone must get back to normal, so the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul cannot remain stuck in time and space, since those in need depend so much on the charitable work of the Conferences, and the hundreds of Vincentian support services, such as care homes for the elderly, and nurseries. As Pope Francis exhorts us, we must not be afraid (Matt 14, 22-33), because God is at our side.

Of those who have been given much, through the countless blessings we have received, much will be demanded (Lk 12, 42-48). God expects much of us, the members, now more than ever, as the consequences of the pandemic, as well as so many tragic deaths, are disastrous for the whole mankind: incalculable losses in schooling, increased mental and psychological illness, spiritual remoteness from God, chaotic information coming from the media, increased deprivation and hunger, among other things.

How can we, as members, use vain excuses not to return to the Conference meetings? Are we clinging to our earthly, mortal life, or do we really believe in the power of God and the wonderful works he achieves in our lives or through us, as tools in his divine hands? Do we really believe that the Conference is a place of holiness, faith, service, prayer, where friendship is shared and grows? Are we exercising true charity, or are we content with virtual charity? “Christianity without contact with those who suffer is a Christianity unable to touch the flesh of Christ”, warned Pope Francis on Twitter, on the feast of St Vincent de Paul, 27 September last year.

We have to return! Of course, we take the protective and medical steps needed, following all the protocols set by the health authorities, but we must return. We take care not to be accused of all that we do not want, particularly when we are responsible before God: egoism, individualism, greed and laziness. We have to strengthen our Conferences, so that we will reach Heaven. 🌍

3.6. Vincentian Family

I will never tire of reaffirming my unconditional support for the Vincentian Family, and I hope that Superior Councils, as well as all the members, adopt the same attitude in their own areas. But keep me informed of any places where it is hard to establish more productive cooperation, a situation to be regretted. The Vincentian Family is a wonderful creation, divinely inspired, which unites us, strengthens us, and opens up many opportunities to extend our charitable action. It is our mission and our institutional obligation to support it. Where we are stronger, it is our moral duty to care for the family, as a priority in our strategy, since this way we ensure provision of more resilient, holistic support.

What we are lacking, excuse my frankness, is a true belief in the Vincentian Family! Why don't some of those visionary “shared projects” never get off the ground? Where are the joint initiatives to reduce the number of people without homes? Why are coordinated events and courses not happening regularly? What are the obstacles which lead to conflicts between the parties? Why are we sometimes skeptical about the Vincentian Family? I really encourage you to understand, better and more intimately, the beauty of being part of this special Vincentian Family structure, a space where together we can do so much more for God's poor people. 🌍

3.7. Results of Elections

Another sad topic which I am often asked to address is the subject of elections in our Society, at various levels, from the Conference up to the Superior Council. I receive dozens



of reports and messages, from all over the world, on serious issues with electoral processes, which produce discord and division. Elections should be moments for celebration, a real celebration of unity; but in some places, they lead to ill-feeling, disagreement and sadness.

I suggest that an Electoral Commission is created every time, in the same pattern as that used by the Council General, so that candidates understand the timings, stages, requirements and rules of each election, so they can proceed in peace and harmony. Rules should be clear and comprehensive. Stepping up for election to serve the SSVP is an act of love and charity, so it should be encouraged and appreciated.

Along with all these aspects is the matter of some candidates who do not recognise the result of an election, criticising the winner, or discrediting the electoral process. Sadly it is not only objective criteria which should guide candidacy, but above all the subjective aspects, such as emotional intelligence, managerial ability, leadership, broad understanding and facility for diplomacy. We always need to improve electoral processes.

There is also another chronic problem: lack of renewal in leadership. There are regions where presidents stay in post for 10, 15 or even 20 years. As well as being completely in contravention of our Rule, this situation shows a lack of charity on the part of those leaders, since by not handing over their responsibilities they do not allow renewal. There are also leaders who, with each new term of office, gravitate into new presidents' roles, just changing position, in order to remain on the boards of Councils and Social Works. This kind of activity is also extremely damaging in terms of structural renewal.

I ask the Good Lord to give the SSVP holy leaders, who are properly prepared to face today's challenges, and that we might be protected from opportunists who join the SSVP with objectives which are in conflict with our culture, our identity and our history. 🙏

3.8. Environmental Issues

One of the topics for today is that of the global climate. The SSVP can also help to reduce the negative impacts which climate change has brought to humanity. No matter where we live, Asia or America, Europe or Africa: this subject is affecting us all the same, rich or poor. In recent years, we have seen huge natural disasters, such as wildfires, catastrophic floods, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. All these events cause destruction and lead to collateral effects, such as unemployment, forced migration, increased poverty, food and housing shortages.

We can all play our part to help the planet, taking simple steps like saving energy, buying an electric car or recycling our waste, up to big actions, such as putting pressure on governments to adopt measures which do less damage to the environment. This is all worthwhile in the struggle to protect our environment.

Our Vincentian Conferences have not yet realised the power they have, or the scope of their charitable work. Everything is charity, including good advice on how to treat the environment, God's creation ("Laudato Sí")¹². We can do a great deal, starting with the simplest actions such as for instance providing the right guidance for our beneficiaries,

¹² "Laudato Si" is an encyclical from Pope Francis, in which he criticises consumerism and irresponsible development, and promotes demands for change and global joint action to combat environmental damage and climate change. The encyclical was officially published on 18 June 2015, and offers a response to expectations of religious, environmental and scientific communities around the world, as well as political, economic and media leaders, with regard to the climate change crisis. Francis makes it clear that he hopes the encyclical will influence the energy and economic policy, and that it will drive a worldwide movement for change, to stop the "global destruction of the environment". The Pope addressed "everyone living on the planet", asking people to put pressure on politicians about it. This was Pope Francis's second encyclical, after publication of "Lumen fidei", in 2013.



teaching them small actions to produce big results. Have we been doing this in our home visits, or in contact with the most vulnerable people? Are we involved in the environmental debate, or do we consider it's not charity? And in our local councils and social works, what are we doing to reduce consumption?

I pray that the SSVP's leaders throughout the world may be encouraged to find out about this, so we can make a difference, both internally and externally. In the same way, I recommend that Conferences should be properly trained so they can help spread environmental information to reduce the harmful effects of pollution and government negligence, particularly on the outskirts of large cities.

We will then be adding value and significance to our charitable work. Future generations hope for this from us, without ideologies or cheap politics, just loving the natural work and caring for our Common Home. It is a focus which attracts young people, who will also understand that being Vincentian is an invitation from God to make a difference in this so unequal and inhuman world. 

3.9. Fasting for Ozanam's Canonization

Every 23rd April, we commemorate two major dates for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul: the birth of Blessed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam (1813), and the creation of the first Conference of Charity (1833). This is a very special day for all of us members. For better, more impactful marking of these dates, in 2021 the International Council General launched the "Spiritual Campaign for the canonisation of Ozanam", encouraging observation of a fast on the 23rd day of every month, devoted to Ozanam's canonisation (fasting according to the provisions of the Church, with discretion and according to local practice).

Why was this 23rd of every month chosen for the fast to support Ozanam's cause? The number 23 is very significant in the life of Vincentians. Ozanam was born on 23 April 1813, married on 23 June 1841, founded the conference of Charity with his friends on 23 April 1833, wrote his will on 23 April 1853 and gave a gift of flowers to his beloved wife Amélie on the 23rd of every month. This means that the number 23 best symbolises Ozanam in the life of every member.

Holy Scripture is full of examples of fasting.¹³ God saved Nineveh from destruction because the city's inhabitants fasted (Jonah 3, 5). Esther asked all the Jews to fast so that God would save them from the genocide of the Persians (Esther 4, 16). Jesus assured his disciples that demons could only be expelled by prayer and fasting (Mt 17, 21). Jesus himself, during the temptation in the desert, fasted for 40 days to free himself from evil (Lk 4, 2).

Fasting is a very powerful spiritual tool. So we are all invited to join with this Spiritual Campaign, on the 23rd day of each month, until the Holy Church officially proclaims Ozanam's canonisation, which will no doubt happen soon. 

¹³ "Fasting, prayer and charity are means we use to assist us in our conversion. So while we are asking God about Ozanam, we are also making ourselves pure in heart. We must offer this fast to God, praying for Ozanam to be canonised soon. This is the fine purpose of this fast suggested by the President General", explains Father Andrés Motto, Congregation of the Mission, spiritual advisor to the International Council General.



3.10. The Theme of Service

Among Presidents General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, it is the tradition to adopt a theme to guide all the management work. The theme comes from the personal values held dear by the President General, who shares the same ideals with their closest colleagues on the Board, with the head office staff and presumably with all the members around the world.

The theme is something personal proposed by the President alone, so should not be confused with the mission or institutional vision of the leadership. The theme I chose in 2016 when I was elected comes from the gospel of St Mark, 9, 33-35: “They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, Jesus asked them: ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ But they kept quiet, because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said to them, ‘Anyone who wants to be first, must be the very last of all and servant of all!’.”

In the Gospel, Lord Jesus shows huge patience with the apostles. When he asks: ‘What were you discussing on the road?’, the apostles are ashamed, and make no reply. But Jesus, who knows the hearts and minds of people, already knew what it was about: they were exchanging views about who among them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not reprimand or condemn them, simply uses their own weakness to teach them.

On the theme of “greatness”, the Saviour tells them that in God’s kingdom, the great ones will be those who serve their brothers and sisters. Service, accepting your brother or sister for who they are, is the mission of every Christian. Serving, helping our neighbours to become better people, is the mission of every Vincentian. Our service is doing works of mercy and charity, and thus we become much closer to the Lord. So this theme invites us to undertake true, committed service in our lives, with our unfortunate brothers and sisters.

Another resounding message from the Word is that we cannot give way to personal claims of ambition, pride and so-called ‘earthly power’, but we are only invited to make our lives a gift of love to others. And Vincentian leaders, who take important decisions on behalf of the poor, must pay special attention to this request of Jesus: do you want to be first in God’s Kingdom? Then, here on earth, be the most humble, the last, the slave and servant of all.

“Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last of all and servant of all”, is a verse that makes it clear that the only valid claim to greatness in the Lord’s eyes is that of the person who, in humility and simplicity, lives the Vincentian virtues actively, and makes their life a free gift of service to their brothers and sisters.¹⁴ Jesus invites us to share our God-given gifts, talents, and resources even more now in these difficult times of the pandemic.

¹⁴ A few verses further on (Mk 10, 42-45), the text highlights the human claims of James and John (the sons of Zebedee) to sit one on his right and one on his left, in the Kingdom established by Jesus. Certainly, James and John imagine that the Kingdom Christ proposes would be something powerful and glorious, and so they yearn for the places of honour by his side. Jesus is firm but loving as always: ‘You know that those who are leaders of nations lord it over them, and their high officials tyrannise them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. Because the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.’ The episode shows how James and John, even after all the teaching they received on the road to Jerusalem, still had not understood how it would be in the Kingdom of God, and continued to think and live in accordance with the ideas of this world. This still happens to many people today, who despite having spent years in the Church, are easily carried away by “little power”, by vanity, ego and pride, so that they take up pride of place in Catholic pastoral care, movements and services. In the face of this sad display of ambition and honour, privilege and leading positions, Jesus does not appear in any way condescending, because any ambition conflicts with the essentials of his own saving gift. In other words, in order to be part of the community of the Kingdom, the disciples have to be ready to follow, with Jesus, the path of suffering, submission, humility, selfless service and charity.



Hence, the theme for the International Council General which I chose focuses exclusively on service, showing the door which takes us into the greatness of the gospel: serving others (as Mt 25, 35-45 tells us). This theme is the distinctive seal of the present team forming Council General, and so it is the invitation I extend to all members, especially Vincentian leaders, at all levels of our God-given organisation, so that they take up their roles as 'servant-leaders', always 'serving in hope', as the banner of our beloved SSVP says. 

4. Year of Le Taillandier

4.1. The "International themed years" project

One of the most noteworthy features of the present term of office of the International Council General (2016-2023) is the matter of the seven founders. Many of our members only know and venerate Blessed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, and the other six founders play a merely supporting role. This is a mistake. They are all leading characters. Ozanam himself, on several occasions, rejected this attitude and was always very fair towards his companions. "There were seven of us", he said in a letter in 1841, celebrating the increasing number of Conferences and members in France and around the world.

But even today, very little is known about the other founders of the first Conference of Charity, founded on 23 April 1833. In order to increase the understanding of the lives and work of the seven founders, we had the idea of launching the "International themed years" project, which has been a success from the outset. This project includes holding an essay competition, issuing a seal relating to the founder of each year, and creating a special logo. So far, the years have covered: 2017 (Bailly de Surcy), 2018 (Lallier), 2019 (Lamache), 2020 (Clavé) and 2021 (Devaux).

The themed years project also involved the launch of a film festival, won by a Brazilian group with their piece, "SSVP: The Beginning"; and the international song competition "The Seven Founders", in various languages, the original version also being composed by Brazilian members. Another notable action as part of this initiative is the visit to the tombs of all the founders, which the Council General Board is doing year after year. The same will happen in 2022, with the spotlight on co-founder Pierre-August Le Taillandier (1811-1886).

The Council General, with this event and other initiatives relating to the "International Themed Years" project, strengthens its commitment to increase understanding of the lives of the seven founders of our beloved Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, included in the international strategic plan, and which is one of the most notable aspects of this term of office. My thanks to all those who have distributed the image of the seven founders (the one on the blue background), and included this topic in the training courses for the SSVP and the Vincentian Family. 

4.2. Who was Le Taillandier?

Pierre-Auguste Le Taillander was born in Rouen, France, on 28 January 1811. He was one of the seven friends who founded the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Paris, on 23 April 1833. He had one younger brother, Charles. His father belonged to a merchant family. His mother came from a noble family. Le Taillandier moved with his family to Paris, where he could complete his legal studies.



He joined the “Conferences of History” with Frédéric Ozanam, and spoke out in favour of carrying out a more practical, beneficial kind of work, instead of the endless theoretical discussions about history, literature and philosophy. Ozanam describe his a “very amiable, well-informed young man, full of common sense”. “His only fault is that he is not from Lyon”, joked Ozanam.

In 1833, he played an active part in founding the first Conference. He also gave religious instruction to aspirant Catholics during home visits and visits to prisoners. One interesting fact: Le Taillandier was cautious at the time about dividing the first “Conference of Charity”, thinking that this decision would mark the end of the organisation. The notes of the meeting record that he wept during the discussion about it in December 1835. But the other founders convinced him it was necessary to allow new members to join the Conference, so they could serve more people in need in Paris.

In 1837, Le Taillandier was at Le Mans, and then in his native city, Rouen. Pierre-Auguste was the first of the young founders to receive the sacrament of matrimony. He married Marie Baudry on 7 August 1838. They had four children, three girls and a boy. In Rouen, he was a director of an insurance company, and of a hospital. In 1841, he founded the Rouen conference of Saint Godard, becoming its president. He was very popular with his fellow Conference members, and with his fellow-citizens, receiving many marks of recognition, although he was never bothered about them.

He spent his final days devoted to his family, to the education of his children, with his friends, the Conference and his beloved garden at home. Pierre-Auguste Le Taillandier died in the city of his birth on March 23rd, 1886, at the age of 75. 🌍

4.3. Literary Contest

On February 8th, 2022, the International Council General will launch the sixth International Literary Competition, “The First Conference - Le Taillandier”. This will reward the essays which offer new or little-known details of the personal, professional, Vincentian and family life of the founder, as well as his contribution to the establishment 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 focused on the life of Blessed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, our greatest example whose canonization process is well advanced, but also in the contribution the other founders have made to the Church, to those in need and to humanity.

The International Council General believes that the international competition “The First Conference - Le Taillandier” will be as successful as the previous ones, which gave prizes to Vincentians from various parts of the world. This is exactly what we want: 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 during this presidency of the Council General.

The competition, to be published on the Council General’s website, will be based on the general guidance used for the previous competitions, so cash prizes will be awarded,¹⁵ both to the winning writers and to the Conferences to which they belong. The guidelines for this

¹⁵ 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.



competition provide all details needed (number of pages, structure of the text, bibliographical sources, languages accepted, deadlines, prizes, etc.). We are sure that the academic work on Le Taillandier will be just as valuable as the previous ones have been, offering interesting features and details from the life of this man who was so important in the SSVP's history.

I invite all Superior or National Councils to publish articles and reflection pieces on the dominant role of Le Taillandier in the process of founding the SSVP, encouraging the study of his life and work, in personal, professional, academic and Vincentian terms, supporting the Council General's implementation of the 2022 International Themed year.

Council General suggests that on 8 December 2022, the closing date of the "International Year of Le Taillandier", a thanksgiving Mass is celebrated in all parishes around the world in memory of this founder. I also encourage Conferences to recall his legacy on 23 March, the day of his death, by reading a text about him as the spiritual reflection for the Conference meeting.

I hope many members from all over the world will take part in the next competition. As President General, I am very proud to have established this important project, and seeing what a great help it has been for our Society. We know much more today about all our founders. 🌐

5. Final Message

5.1. An expanding society

Since the creation of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in 1833, and even more since the foundation of the International Council General in 1839, we know our organisation has been growing, in both quality and quantity. Throughout these almost 200 years of the Vincentian story, the International Confederation of the SSVP has greatly expanded. Perhaps not even our founders could have foreseen how far we have come.

At present, the Society is found in 153 territories, with 800,000 members, 48,000 Conferences, 5000 Social Works and 30 million people helped every day. These are impressive figures, which fill us with pride, joy and great social responsibility. On Council General's website, there is information about the 153 territories, which has the e-mail address of the national president, the full address of the national office and statistics for each location, with the number of conferences and of the members.

During the present term of office of the International Council General, of which I am proud to fill the important role of President General, significant progress has been made in SSVP's expansion. Seven new territories have joined the Confederation since 2016: **Vatican City, Albania, Cyprus, Cayman Islands, Liberia, Tanzania and Cape Verde**. There are still 15 more nations which have been noted that, by God's grace, have the right conditions for founding a Conference, including Greece and the Scandinavian countries. All this effort is included in the strategic plan of the Council General through the "SSVP Plus" Project.

During this five-year term of office, including the coronavirus crisis which we have experienced in the last two years, the number of aggregations of Conferences and Councils instituted has broken all records: there were **3,000 aggregations** and **200 institutions**. These figures show that SSVP, despite the dark times in which we are living, will always be blessed by God, since it is divinely inspired and its role as an organisation is very important: the sanctity of its members, and charity towards those who suffer. 🌐



5.2. Final Thanks

I would like to express herein my deep gratitude to the Board of the Council General, consisting of 12 members, chosen by me after consultation with the member countries, taking into account the profile, qualities and strengths of each person. As well as the Board, some 120 members belong to the various departments, committees, vice-presidencies, working groups or missions of the Council General. And at our international office, located in Paris, we have seven highly qualified and experienced staff members.

I would also like to thank especially the 153 territories which form our Confederation. I always express my thanks to all of them, because, without the support of the staff, the Superior Councils and the Board, it would be impossible to be a good President General. This is real teamwork!

As always, I kindly request the whole international Vincentian community to pray for the successful completion of projects, programmes, and initiatives undertaken by the Council General, in harmony with the international strategic plan, in order to strengthen the SSVP. If I continue to succeed in this mission, I will be very happy, and I will have fulfilled my role as leader of this “holy army of charity”. 

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

