



## Circular Letter

Paris/Madrid, 30 June 2001

*From The President-General*

### **A CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR CONFRERES, MEMBERS OF SAINT VINCENT'S CONFERENCES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD**

Dear brothers and sisters:

The vocation of serving the poor, in the true community of prayer and action which each Conference must carry out, is not only restricted to the life of our own Vincentian group. When we joined a Conference for the first time it is likely that some of the existing members will have told us how, like them, we had now become part of an international fraternity within a great organisation noted for the bonds of friendship and brotherhood amongst members, an organisation ranging through more than a hundred and thirty countries and to which hundreds of thousands of people belonged. They are ordinary men and women: simple, humble lay Christians, workers often without any resources other than prayer and a generous, unselfish, person to person commitment to share in the suffering of others. Amongst other things we might have been told is that we make up one of the most important Catholic institutions in the world.

The regard in which Conferences are held in the Catholic world is an honour but, more so, it places on us a responsibility to be more caring for the needs of the Church of the poor whom we wish to serve<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, since our sense of belonging to the Holy Church of the poor is fundamental, we should have a very clear understanding of what this means and how it obliges us to live. It may help when we recall the following simple rules which have evolved from our tradition:

- \* Vincentians pray and meditate on the word of God in the Christian community of the Conference, the active union of love and friendship with their friends in the group being their primary concern<sup>2</sup>.
- \* Vincentians share in the suffering and needs of the poor, as individuals and as a group, using their prayer, work, imagination and dreams as a way of finding paths to end their suffering. Working actively in all possible social fields, without forgetting first how to provide comfort for the individual human being who is suffering.
- \* Vincentians do not judge: they are always available<sup>3</sup>.
- \* Vincentians are faithful to their baptismal vows, particularly in their commitment to the poor.
- \* Vincentians have a deep love for the Holy Church of Christ<sup>4</sup>.
- \* Vincentians constantly feel concerned about the training which will equip them to give the best service in Christ for poor people, throughout the Holy Church and the Christian community.<sup>5</sup>

- \* Vincentians are aware of their responsibility in spreading the Good News and their duty to do this by example through the testimony of their own lives, being cheerful witnesses of hope.<sup>6 7</sup>
- \* Vincentians enjoy and look after the land in which they each live and work. They also feel they are world citizens and brothers of the whole human race.<sup>8</sup>
- \* Vincentians enjoy working together. They take strength from their community spirit which leads to a commitment to the poorest people. Members always carry out this work in pairs, working closely together.<sup>9</sup>

All these needs, gathered together in our most precious tradition, must make us think about what belonging to the Conferences means to each one of us. Indeed, too often we lapse into conformity and routine. The calm of our weekly meeting, even if it does a lot of good to the people we meet, can cause us to avoid the need to continually examine our surroundings and identify the new causes of suffering which continually appear. This routine conformity, which can be seen in some of our Conferences, ends up by making us look wrinkled, old and unattractive to those outside the Society who look at us and contrast what we do against what we are seriously obliged to deliver. This shortcoming is often found in many of our Conferences particularly in the so-called first world from where, coincidentally, Vincentians complain that there are no new members joining them. These beloved members must ask, do we pay sufficient attention to the overflowing needs of today which concern the world in which we work and wish to serve?<sup>10</sup> Do we use suitable language? Do we use ways and means suitable for our time? Surely a calm reflection will make those of us in this situation change our way of working, of perceiving the reality and, thereby, in that way we will attract new members.

One of the most serious duties for each of our groups is to look at the circumstances in our own area<sup>11</sup>. Rushing things and a failure to review our work often are perhaps the greatest enemies in the life of members and their Conferences. The work for the most needy we serve cannot leave us without time for reflection, for calm reflection on our work.

I think that it would be very good, and that the benefits would rapidly be noticed in Conference life, if we would use a Conference meeting to look at our methods and their effectiveness. This should be done at least once every three months, and we should consider not only how to deal with the emerging poverty that is noticeable around us, but also to discover new causes of suffering and see clearly if we are ready to receive new members amongst us<sup>12</sup>. Are our procedures appropriate and is the image we portray to newcomers to our group such that they will feel welcome and want to join us in our Christian community of prayer and action where we will work together to relieve our brothers' suffering. Occasionally I have the impression that hope, which faith nurtures, is missing due to a false modesty in communicating to others what we do and the benefits we receive<sup>13</sup>.

Up to this point, and although I shall return later to this theme of welcoming new members, it is good to recall our duty to bring new members to our fraternal groups for two basic reasons. The first, and without putting them in any order of priority since both are equally important, the first, I repeat, is to enlarge the capacity to help our friends in

need<sup>14</sup> in order to expand our care for all the needs which surround us. The second point is that we have an apostolic duty to extend the spiritual and fraternal benefit which exists in being a Vincentian, and which we have ourselves benefited from, to others through membership of our Society. I think I can say without any shadow of a doubt that a Conference which does not grow each year has lost its ability to inspire love and to convince others of its potential value to them. It has lost its appeal and this loss means that it is moving away from the principles of our fraternity, which by its tolerance, fresh outlook, freedom, friendship, strength of commitment etc., should always be appealing to those who look at us from outside.

Having said all this, this seems a good time to review and to reflect upon what a Conference meeting should entail, and how it should be conducted in Vincentian ways which have been influenced by the experience of so many years. We must not forget that the final goal of our fraternal association is, above all, to walk together on the path of perfection which is to take us to the House of the Father<sup>15</sup>. Let us remember that the Conferences have been created *to contribute to the deepening of their members' faith*<sup>16</sup>. Help for those in need shall feed the spirituality experienced at the heart of the Conference whose warmth, in its turn, enables charitable feelings and love for our neighbour to exist and grow.<sup>17</sup> From reaching the highest levels of commitment to those who suffer, we can indeed be united and in communion with the Divine Master. The Conference meeting is, then, a place in which we are going to deepen our faith, to strengthen our hope and commitment in charity and in love.

Reminded of these basic principles of our Vincentian philosophy, it is time to review and comment on the different parts of a Conference meeting, which I will attempt to do in the order they usually occur.

These general points, to which we attach little importance most of the time, largely contribute to creating the right atmosphere which must exist during the Conference meeting.

The *frequency of meetings* is essential to keep and develop an increasingly deep and close friendship among the members. However, it is also essential that our help to those who are suffering is as efficient as it needs to be. We should always bear in mind that our effort is urgent, because it addresses people, people who suffer. Since founding our Conferences we estimate that the ideal time for our meetings is every week. To shorten the number of the meetings is often impossible and to arrange them on a fortnightly basis seems too long a period to give an appropriate service.

*Where* the meeting is held, which obviously should not be luxurious, should be a decent place, located in the same area in which we operate, and should be familiar to friends in need and to the different religious and social agencies who are active in the locality, and with whom we should always be prepared to collaborate in serving those in need. It should be a place, if our modest means allow, in which it is pleasant to hold a meeting. Neither freezing in winter, nor stifling in summer; a physical space in which we try to feel at home and are at ease with our surroundings.

Traditionally, Conferences have been very united, working in parish meeting rooms in the areas in which they carried out their work. This is highly recommended since it should be easier to co-operate and work together on the diocesan and parish pastoral work. However, when this is not possible due to various adverse conditions which may occur, our

groups can make use of other places for their meetings and derive the maximum possible benefit. Not only must our funds be at the service of the poor, but also everything that we have which can be put into service, however small these resources may be.

It is also very appropriate, and borne out by the experience of many areas, to try for more regular contact between members apart from the regular Vincentian meeting.<sup>18</sup>. Communal activities and an active social life etc. help, in most cases, to make us feel members of a community which fully shapes our lives, not only for the period of the weekly meeting<sup>19</sup>.

Punctuality is a basic rule in any social community. It is very important that each member arrives a few minutes early so that the meeting can start on time. This avoids latecomers causing distraction to those who are already present. Perhaps it our first example of a loving deed, of commitment which the rest of our members need from us.

Let us now look at the meeting itself. The meeting begins with the opening prayer led by the President. We must all assume a system of dialogue. That is what prayer is about. Let us seriously request the help of the Holy Spirit, thinking about what we are doing. The community is reunited. Let us open our hearts to the Father and to our brothers and sisters. I think that this is the most important time in the meeting because it sets the tone for what is to follow. We are ready to accept our role as instruments. Let us not carry this out mechanically<sup>20</sup>.

We must have a very serious understanding of what we are experiencing as a group, as a community in the presence of God and act in His name and His presence. The spirit in which we say this first prayer, I repeat, must have an effect on how we deal with the different matters arising throughout the meeting.

The reading and meditation which follow must be centred on a text which strengthens our ecclesial and Christian life, the lay and Vincentian charism and a deepening of our love. Also use texts which relate to our actions. They should remind us of our duty to be aware of new forms of suffering which we are duty-bound to react to and to relieve<sup>21</sup>. By calling upon our strength we must put ourselves on a path whereby we help to improve the situation in which our friends in need find themselves, not simply to deal with the effects but also to look for the causes. It is not a time for the Secretary to be drawing up the minutes or for the Treasurer to be dealing with the accounts. It is the key time of the meeting. We must connect the soul directly to the senses. We suggest, if appropriate, that different members, not only the spiritual adviser, spend part of the week looking for material for the reading-meditation and that this should not last longer than ten minutes. Later on, a few moments of silence will help us to absorb what we have heard.

We have already taken in what we have heard. The text has told us something which reaches the deepest part of each one of us. Now it is a question of joining together, enriching ourselves by listening to our members' comments. There should be ten or fifteen minutes where full exchanges of viewpoints and spiritual and intellectual enrichment can take place.

For this communal meeting, the role of the religious adviser is fundamentally important. With their knowledge of how to act charitably they can show us by avoiding any sort of self-seeking. They should focus their discussions, should correct there and then where there would be any need to do so, and look after, with everyone's help, the

maintenance of faith and doctrine. If there is no religious adviser this role should be undertaken by the President of the Conference or a member especially prepared for this.

Later on we come to the reading of the minutes of the previous meeting and the Treasurer's accounts which have been prepared before by the Secretary and Treasurer respectively. Changes are made where appropriate, and both are then approved by the members of the Conference.

The time arrives for reports on the situation of our brothers and sisters in need to whom we have given help. The entrusted pairs will set out the situation of most urgent need which they have encountered and how to resolve it. We listen to the opinion of our members on the reports which are always governed by charity. Their comments and advice will help to reach the best solution in the interest of those we serve. It is very fitting that all the members follow this part of the meeting with great interest. The experience of each one can doubtless help the others.

Each week, let us give special attention to one pair to set out in full detail the circumstances which a certain family is experiencing or the work recommended by them. Their story, needs, faults and virtues etc. should be mentioned so that we can know how to strengthen the latter and minimise the former. This is so we can provide a better service. In this way the whole Conference will be kept up-to-date with the situation of those we support and it will be easy to continue the work undertaken when a member is missing for whatever reason. Many Conferences frequently change how the pairs of visitors are made up, both for the families' sake and for the work which the members carry out. Alternating in this way allows for a greater range of experience and opinion and will usually result in a better service.

Let us not forget those who are far away and whom we cannot see but to whom we have a spiritual duty. There are poor people everywhere and in all societies, no matter how rich they seem. When we do not see people who are poor in economic terms around us, when we are dealing with poverty of another type, of morality, illness etc., it is easy to forget that in other cities and nations, other Vincentians are unable to attend to the material needs of those who are very poor, because they do not have the means to do so. Let us send the resources they require to them. Let us not be miserly but rejoice, knowing that they will be well supplied from within the Vincentian family. Let us open our soul to the world and make our outlook global. We can overcome our own parochialism by becoming aware that Christ has wanted us to be universal. Gradually we will become aware of belonging to a Saint Vincent de Paul Society which is truly international.

Nor should we forget members who stop attending the Conference meeting: are they ill? Have we misinformed them in any way? Are they having some difficulty? As we are trying to look after others, those beyond the Conference community, are we going to forget our closest neighbours?

A wonderful custom, unfortunately somewhat forgotten, is that of candidates, future members, being presented beforehand to work with us. It is appropriate when an existing member intends to bring a new member that the Conference is informed in advance as to who the person is and why they are being invited to join. The Conference should be advised about the personal circumstances of the person, their reasons for wanting to join the Conference and basically how they can help the Conference in its work.

It is important that we assess our strengths. We should attempt to recruit new members and, when we do, we should make them welcome and at all times give them special and particular attention, especially until they feel comfortable amongst us. We should try to grow while being aware of the risk which is always involved. We can ask the Holy Spirit for guidance and reach an agreement within the Conference which will feature in the minutes. We should welcome the new brother or sister at the following meeting, aware of the challenge which we are facing, that of growing which is always climbing a steep incline on the road to perfection to which our Father has called us.<sup>22</sup>

Then comes the collection. The time for money? No. The time for sharing, for giving<sup>23</sup>. Not only to be ready to give what we have to spare, but to dispense with what causes us pain in our desire to possess and to share what is ours with a suffering brother who urgently needs it. We do not say if he needs it more or less than us but that he needs it "urgently". The meeting has been "warming us up". We have shared in the problems of others, we have made them ours. Now, in the secret collection, we are trying to generate the necessary resources so that our brothers in need may suffer less.

At the end of the meeting, let us give thanks to God in our final prayers. The hour and a half or two hours of our meeting reach an end. Let us pause to ask Our Lord to help us keep alive the fire of love obtained during the meeting so that it can affect our whole life, not only during the time of the Conference meeting but all of the time. Let us commend ourselves to Mary, the Mother of the Church, through Blessed Frederick Ozanam and Saint Vincent de Paul. Afterwards let us go to flood the world with the love that, all together, we have been able to mirror from the Father.

Finally we reach the visiting of friends in need, the personal contact with the suffering. Our visitation should be carried out, as an old member used to say, like a "stopped clock". It is like a meeting with our dearest relative. No hurrying, no impositions, tolerantly, scrupulously respecting freedom of choice even when it may be wrong<sup>24</sup>. We are going to try to share with them, to help them, not to organise their life. From the goodness with which we put forward our alternatives, from the attention, understanding and closeness that we use to advise them, from the sincerity which we show in our commitment, it should mean that they feel part of us and discover the ultimate purpose of any action by the Conferences, personal identification with members and our friends in need whose burdens we wish to share and make our own.

My dear friends, from the beginning of time, with the Sacrament of Baptism<sup>25</sup>, spreading the Good News calls out to us, to everyone, not only to those Christians who have been ordained in the service of the Church. In our time, this call has become especially urgent. If it is urgent for all the people of God, it is particularly so for those of us who have acquired a clear commitment of service to the poor. We are to preach with the example of our actions. This is true, but also we are to get used to preaching to men in a loud voice that God loves them. The Holy Church, especially today, needs people to spread the Gospel<sup>26</sup>. Men and women who take the message of Christ to places of work, entertainment, families etc. and incorporate the message in the actions of our daily life.

Our founders, that group of young men who, like nobody else, could interpret the inheritance of Saint Vincent de Paul, left us the Saint of poor people as a living example. At these times it is especially interesting and necessary for Vincentians in their church service to recover the missionary inheritance of Saint Vincent<sup>27</sup>.

We are frequently reminded that it is the time for the commitment of lay people. But that is of lay people in communal action, in mutual help groups. Let us not forget to foster the basic spiritual wealth of our Society. In addition to nurturing this wealth, we are obliged to act. Each day, each Vincentian undertakes their work in the calm knowledge that, unworthy of the message they bear, they have given joy to God, through bringing the presence of the Son of Man to each place they have been.

I turn my eyes to Mary who is our Mother, sent by our Heavenly Father, so that we can serve poor people faithfully and well according to Saint Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frederick Ozanam

José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha  
XIV International President General

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<sup>1</sup> You represent an obvious expression of the charity practised in every continent, a service to the poor which is, as Vincent used to say, a way of serving Christ. For your daily dedication, your association represents for the Church a permanent reminder of your vocation to show Christ's love to the poor. (John Paul II in his message to the Society of St. Vincent, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>2</sup> The Society's main aim is to form a group or association of mutual encouragement for young Catholics, where friendship, support, example, a substitute Christian family can be found in which we have grown up ... Therefore the strongest bond is the beginning of a true friendship, it is charity and charity cannot exist without spreading outwards. (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, letter to L.Courmier, 4-11-1834)

<sup>3</sup> Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn and you will not be condemned yourselves; grant pardon and you will be pardoned. Give, and there will be gifts for you (Lk 6, 36-38)

<sup>4</sup> I hold Catholic doctrine closer to me than life itself, and therefore I love and serve the Catholic Church with all my heart. (Blessed Frederic Ozanam)

<sup>5</sup> Besides spiritual training you require solid philosophical, moral, theological, doctrinal preparation according to the differences in age, condition and talent. Do not discard in any way the importance of culture in general, linked to technical and practical training (Vatican II, Apostolate of the Lay, 29)

<sup>6</sup> The Gospel cannot deeply penetrate people's consciences, life and work without the active presence of lay people. (Vatican II, Decree on Church Missionary activity, 21a)

<sup>7</sup> Always ready to provide, with good manners and a clear conscience, reason for your hope to anyone who asks you for an explanation. (1 Pe. 3.15)

<sup>8</sup> The human race has the same destiny and does not split up now into several different histories. The human race thus moves from a rather static concept of reality to another, more dynamic and evolutionary, out of which arises a new set of problems that demand new analyses and syntheses. (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the world, 5 c)

<sup>9</sup> Let us remember, my fathers and brothers, that we will not achieve this happiness, this honour, if we do not strive to keep the holy union that we have so strongly recommended to you; for that reason we must use the means which have been pointed out to you, especially the mutual respect and esteem between us and, above all, the holy humility and the avoidance of any criticism or slander (St Vincent de Paul, Conference to the Fathers of the Mission, 13 December 1658).

<sup>10</sup> The institutions, laws, ways of thinking and feeling inherited from the past do not always easily adapt to the current state of affairs. (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the World, 7 b)

<sup>11</sup> Lay people offer their experience and take up the responsibility in the diligent examination of the conditions in which the pastoral action of the Church is to be exercised, and in the preparation and development of the methods of action. (Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay, 4 20b).

<sup>12</sup> The joys and hopes, the sadness and suffering of men in our time, particularly the poor and suffering, are, at the same time, the joys and hopes, sadness and suffering of Christ's disciples (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the world, 1)

<sup>13</sup> Faith enlightens everything with a new light and reveals the divine plan on the complete vocation of man (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the world, 11a)

<sup>14</sup> Let us grow and multiply, let us do everything we can to be better, more tender and stronger since, as days go by, we can see evil upon evil and misery upon misery. (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, letter to Bailly, 22 October 1836)

<sup>15</sup> You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt 5, 48)

<sup>16</sup> We felt the wish and the need to keep our faith in the midst of attacks from the different schools of false prophets. It was then that we said to ourselves, let us work! Let us do something consistent with our faith. But what could we do to be true Catholics but devote ourselves to doing what most pleased God? Let us help, then, our neighbour as Jesus Christ did and let us put our faith under the protective wings of charity. (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, Speech to the Conference of Florence, 30 January 1853)

<sup>17</sup> So that the spirit of Jesus Christ reign in them and give them the strength to persevere in this way of life (it is a reference to the service to the poor) fully spiritual although it is shown in continuing external actions which seem low and despicable in the eyes of the world but which are great before God (Saint Louise de Marillac, letter to Sister Margarita Chetif, 10 January 1660)

<sup>18</sup> Therefore Conferences which are exclusively busy with the poor without their visitors trying to improve relationships of Christian friendship and fraternal affection, would not correspond to one of the essential aims of their Work. (Julio Gossin, III General President of the S.S.V.P. Circular of 1-11-1847)

<sup>19</sup> The lay people, by cultivating Christian friendship, help each other in all their needs (Vatican II Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay 4, f)

<sup>20</sup> To examine ourselves to discover new ties, to break them. Indeed, my brothers, the effectiveness of prayer should be well acquainted with our inclinations and attachments. (Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference on apathy 16.05.1659)

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<sup>21</sup> The science of social welfare and well-meaning reforms is not learnt only by poring over books or listening to political debate, but by going up to the houses of the poor, sitting at their bedside, suffering the cold with them and sharing the secret of their broken heart and ruined conscience. Only when we have studied the poor man in this way, at home, in the hospital, in the workshop, in cities and in the countryside and in every condition in which God placed them, only then, provided with all the parts of such a huge problem can we begin to understand it and can think about solving it. (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, *L'Ere Nouvelle*, 14 October 1848)

<sup>22</sup> They praised God and had the sympathy of the whole people. The Lord added to the Community each day for those who were to be saved. (HCH 2, 47)

<sup>23</sup> The collection takes on a meaningful value because it is not a matter of giving what is extra to us to relieve our own conscience but about taking upon ourselves the misery present in the works with an attitude of solidarity. When considering the anguished face and suffering conditions of many brothers and sisters we cannot refuse to share at least part of our own possessions with those who are in difficulty. (John Paul II Lenten message 2001)

<sup>24</sup> Who, in obedience to God, is searching above all for the Kingdom of God, finds here a stronger and purer love to help all his brothers to carry out the work of justice under the inspiration of charity. (Vatican II, Constitution of the Church in the world 72b)

<sup>25</sup> Faithful Christians are united with Christ by Baptism, make up God's people thus sharing Christ's actual, prophetic and priestly function, according to everyone's condition are called upon to play a part in the mission which God commended the Church to fulfil in the world (Catechism of the Church, 871)

<sup>26</sup> Such evangelism (of the laity) that is Christ's message proclaimed by the testimony of His life and word, acquires a specific feature and singular effectiveness due to the fact that it is carried out in the shared conditions of the world. (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 35 b)

<sup>27</sup> Do you not think that many workers who are idle could be used in the great harvest where they now work, and that those who know how badly the Lord needs more labour for the crops will be the ones to blame for His Son's Blood which they render useless due to not applying themselves? (Saint Vincent de Paul, letter to a clergyman, 9-7-1633)