

Paris, June 30, 2007

**CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR COLLEAGUES,
MEMBERS OF THE CONFERENCES
OF THE SOCIETY OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL IN THE WORLD**

Dear Friends and Companions:

**Return to God That Which Belongs to Him
Alone**

With the example of the very edict of the 2nd Vatican Council, we have been reminded, nay even more appropriately, Christians have been charged with the retaking of the initial forces that inspired and sheltered the vigor of those ecclesial movements at their inception. It was a universal call to probing into the stimuli that had inspired the beginnings of each movement and of the Holy Church itself, so that from that instant, from the intensity of the first hour, we launched anew into serving the world in accordance with our own vocation. The Council intended for us to detach ourselves from the debris that time had placed over the blooms that once had constituted the first goals.

For the Society also, for the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, this drawing nearer to our origins in order to recapture the first impulse and, afterward to examine the current status, reconsidering to what point that historic moment in which we were living presided over them and how necessary and adaptable they were to a distant time, the very instant of the foundation.

In the 1970's the members found themselves – the first time in which the Society proposed to revise the Rule – that in the Conferences, the intentions were very clear, as the motivations that contributed to the original foundation were. In the same way, it would occur with the revision of the Rule, that which was attained in October of 2003¹.

The first documents say of the fledgling Society that, apart from the base of solid friendship among the founders, they met in order to find help for the poor carrying out and following evangelistic direction, in particular, those who were more directly familiar with the practice of Charity. About helping the poorest and doing it in a direct and personal manner, the slightest doubt does not exist,

¹ The present Rule of the Confederation and the International Statutes, are available on the website of the Confederation, at: www.ozanet.org.

nor the least shadow of it. They desired to help the poor, give testimony with their lives to the vitality of the Holy Church – not being satisfied with a simple intellectual defense of the faith, in which they had for years been obligated as members of the Society of Good Studies² – and in whose mission (the defense of the Church) so many times they had felt themselves failures. Their own search for the personal enhancement of each member, the search of the personal sanctification of each of them, fulfilled the desire of the founders – since the first gathering – to obligate themselves to surrender to the poorest, as aforementioned.

They were also conscious of the very necessity of these same sentiments and aspirations and of their efficacy, at the moment they were being examined in the era of the 1970's in the past century. That is: they had not become passé. The friendship among members was and continues to be necessary – as well as the personal obligation of said members with the Church of the poorest of the poor – with the desire to find themselves each day closer with its action to return for love that which for Love has been granted to them.

For all of this, it is important to keep a clear conscience on the reality that guided the foundation of the Society and how it came to be. Fundamentally it is important because of what must influence the daily life of the Society. If we speak of foundation – and with the practically unedited particularities in the History of the Church in which they were produced – it is important to reflect about which person, or better yet, which persons we can consider founder or founders of the Society. It is a long history of which I shall intend to construct a small summary.

We must remember, that in those first years of the life of the Conferences, the initial members categorically refused to lay any personal claim of the foundation to themselves. They were sure that it

² To deepen knowledge about the foundation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul I recommend the book “La Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, a memoir of the origins of the movement,” by professor Charles Mercier, L’Harmattan Publishers, Paris.

was just a small work loved by God that had begun humbly, and with the same humility could disappear from one day to the next. They found it repugnant to claim any position of honor in the foundation since they all knew well how it all began and in how much of it there was mystical intervention by Divine Providence above and beyond all of them, including and in some cases, over and above the very will of the founders.

Only after the departure from the General Presidency of Emmanuel Bailly and provoked by his resignation letter of which Frédéric Ozanam³ was a signatory, was it accepted that Bailly could be humanly considered as the true promoter and founder of the Society – the true “factotum” – the providential man without whom the Society could possibly ever have existed as we know it today. Earlier obligations and the ups and downs of the turbulent History of France and of the Society at that time, led the Council General to realize the necessity of acknowledging the title of principal founder to Frédéric Ozanam ahead of the very Bailly. And this has continued until today and to such a point of acceptance by the membership in many locations of the world and by many members, who are unaware of the ultimate reality of our foundation and who consider Ozanam the one and only founder⁴ of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul. It is a half-truth that notably impoverishes the life of the Conferences and their possibilities of performing.

Because the truth is another very different one. The reality is that a one-only-founder does not exist and apart from the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul and to this truth, we should be adjusting our knowledge first and then afterward our performance. Knowledge of the historic truth and its consequences for the life of each of our Conferences should become something extraordinarily necessary. The demands that this knowledge should signify in each of our work groups in the world, will be vital to apply in our days the services of that first Conference, as we shall see further ahead.

Actually, if we review the first details – surrounding our foundation – on which we agree, it will never be understood without the knowledge that it was to Le Taillandier that the

³ Signatories of the Circular Letter were the two Vice Presidents of the Council General, one of whom was Frédéric Ozanam himself.

⁴ There are many countries in which the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is presented as having been founded by Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, without the least mention of the remainder of the co-founders, many of whom are mentioned in other parts of this Circular Letter, and who cannot be denied as being absolutely indispensable to the development of the Society.

first idea occurred to unite to help the poor⁵. Likewise, the history of the Society will never be understood if we don't assume that it was Bailly⁶ who secured the first footprint of the fledgling association and possibly was the one who made sure that the founders looked toward St. Vincent as their future patron⁷. The history of the Society will never be understood, if we do not know that the first Rule to be put in force was drawn up by Lallier – at the time Secretary General – and that Emmanuel Bailly⁸ wholly wrote the Prologue. One cannot comprehend, without understanding and studying in depth, the contribution of Sister Rosalie Rendu to the dawning group, with the example and instruction of her good works as a faithful disciple of St. Vincent. In her the first members found the figure of their Patron Saint. Just as it would not be understood without the contribution of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and his clarity in the face of the first identity crises that confronted the Society in its first decades. Perhaps to him, to Frédéric Ozanam, we owe – more than any other of the original members – credit for having maintained the institution as an exclusively lay one. In no one, therefore, was there “exclusivity” of God to be considered only founder. In accordance with what was believed in the decades prior to our foundation, as mentioned above, I believe firmly that that role Our Good Lord reserved for Himself and it is to Him that truly corresponds, in purity, the title of Founder.

Without doubt, the Good Lord, through the action of the Holy Spirit, chose all those men, the majority extremely young, so that each of them contributing the best of the talents they had been granted, were faithful instruments for the creation of a lay Institution, that was to extend itself throughout the

⁵ Idea that was in the beginning firmly rejected by Lallier and Ozanam himself, who were inclined, at that time, toward the intellectual defense of the Works of the Church in history.

⁶ “...he had the idea (referring to Bailly), with the goal of charity under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul, to unite a small number of youth...” (Circular Letter dated June 11, 1844, signed by the two General Vice Presidents: Ozanam and Cornudet and recorded by Secretary Baudicour).

⁷ He himself possessed a good formation, obtained in the Seminary of the Lazarist (Vincentian) Fathers with whom his family was very close, to the point of safeguarding valuable documents of the Congregation of the Mission during those turbulent periods in the history of France. A brother of Bailly himself, a well-thought-of priest named Paul, was at the point of being elected Superior General of the Congregation. It is also Bailly who put the first members under the caring custody of Sister Rosalie Rendu, for their formation in the practice of charity and how to accomplish, with love, contact with the poorest.

⁸ I refer to the Prologue to the Rule of 1835, the first with which the Society is endowed to govern itself.

world⁹. Did some contribute more than others? Undoubtedly! To none of them, I repeat, corresponds in fairness the merit of having founded the Conferences of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul¹⁰ but only to God, who is the One who chose them to live the Gospel and to spread it among those in most need of justice and peace.

It is in the form of their “collegial” conduct upon which the Holy Spirit intervenes, and enlightens them on the path they are taking. This “college” of Christian friends who strive to carry their love, to accept the mission as laymen within the Holy Church, is the true importance of our foundation along side them who God had chosen to take the lead humanly.

That is to say, the foundation’s true importance is that the Good Lord elects a group of normal laymen, the majority students, – through the charitable action of the Holy Spirit whom they know how to listen to and understand – to create the humble work of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul that today are spread all over the whole world.

Nevertheless, it is a permanent Foundation for today and for the future.

Having examined all of the above, the historical, we should make a concerted effort to not remain simply in an intellectual exercise that all this supposes, but better yet, see to its application in our day, that is, in the lifework that the Good Lord has for our Society, for each Conference and for each one of us who make them up individually. We shall see!

When we are born, each one of us, in spite of our humble origins and the positions we occupy in our life, come into the world as part of the Good Lord’s plan in the History of Salvation. That is to say: none of us appears in this world for naught or without profound motivation that goes beyond the very love with which we were begotten by our parents. For each one, the Lord has plans, he endows us with certain faculties, granting at the same time, the will to care for them or to reject them. In His infinite goodness, He respects totally the freedom of each person, but, at the same time, He dreams that each one be capable of discovery, of commitment, to the mission He has entrusted to

⁹ Rule of the International Council of SSVdP, Article 1.1

¹⁰ According to tradition, it was the confrère Jean-Luc Le Prevost, the President of the second Conference to be created (that of St. Sulpice, in Paris), who suggested to the early Vincentians that they celebrate the festival of Saint Vincent de Paul. The aforementioned confrère, together with two others, founded the Religieux de Saint Vincent de Paul.

all. A mission that, no doubt, should always aspire to be presided over by Love and accepted with the freedom that He precisely gives us with His surrender, making Himself human for us.

Each Christian – each one of the Vincentians to whom I direct once more this annual message – must achieve, in God’s eternal time – for He is eternal – the discovery that this is what he wants from each and everyone of us in the time in which He has given us life; in our time that we have valued and can tell about it.

However, there is no demand that solely presents itself to each human being, considered individually. The obligation extends also to Institutions. It reaches to each one of our Conferences. Precisely, if higher above we have left established the intervention of the Lord in our foundation, we must have the absolute assurance He has desired and expects, a determined form of behavior for the Society of long ago and also for the one of today. He desires that we allow Him to intervene in each of our Conferences. It is in reiteration of what has been accomplished with our founders and to achieve a permanent foundation in each of our Conferences that will take us to the improvement each day of our service to the poorest of the poor and of our very members who together, make up each Conference. That is to say: how we achieve living in a permanent foundation that is duplicated in each of our Conferences, in order to monitor what the Spirit wants of us at this moment.

The Society, each of our Conferences in its past, present and future, have been created for one historic instant. They have not been founded solely to tend to some determined poverties. No! On the contrary, they have been created to adapt themselves to all types of situations of poverty and for in each of them, to find the adequate answer derived from love¹¹. They are timeless, they do not belong to a specific era, and because of that, as circumstances change in the world around us, we are also to change and adapt to them.

Nevertheless, it is not always easy. It is not, fundamentally, because we trust too much in our own strengths and we are not conscious of the enormous richness they represent and they provide the ways of our Foundation to the ones I have referred to in the first part of this Circular Letter. It is here where we must observe with fidelity, the most absolute originality of our foundation.

If the Conferences of those days knew how to adapt themselves to the circumstances that surrounded them; if they knew how to overcome the first

¹¹ Rule of the International Council of SSVdP, Article 1.6

poverties they tended to; if they were capable of going to other poor, such as the soldiers of those time who could not read, it was because they had over them the invaluable support of the Holy Spirit, over this association which they made up.

That spirit of collegiality, of listening to one another, of all feeling called together to one sole mission in which the individual starring roles did not exist, is the same as the one that should preside today in our Conferences with meetings where all can contribute precisely what the Holy Spirit inspires at each moment. Some Conferences, disposed to repeat the accomplishments of that first one in 1833: To listen to what the Good Lord desires of us and to accept that He can inspire us through any of the members who make it up. Some Conferences are disposed to understand that their mission is to listen toward where the Spirit moves them and what challenges He inspires.

Some Conferences, when they meet, are inclined to forget about the ways and habits of the world; they forget the necessity and the desire to improve individually; they forget to always desire to want what is right¹², and to the contrary, listen to what the other members say. They forget that the mission of each one is not always the most important missions accomplished by the Conference, and that frequently we discover through attentive listening that at times the most humble and those who express themselves most simply, are the ones closest to the truth, pointing to the true role, the true challenge which in each occasion should concern and preoccupy the group of members.

If that collegiality is first sought and then in its management watched over with great care in each of our Conferences, in a short time the members will see their lives change and achieve a better service to those who are suffering. Those shall be the most useful meetings for all. Also, each of the members shall be enriched by what each one can contribute for the good progress of the Conference itself. They will enhance themselves with the action of the Holy Spirit as it occurred in that first Conference.

It is a clear mission for the Presidents – to whom I would recommend an attentive re-read of the second part of my Circular Letter of the 30th of June 2005¹³ – in which I referred to the characteristics of the Presidents within the Society. Precisely, apart from the missions that in that letter were pointed out as proven by the best Vincentian

¹² “It is understood through personal self-denial (one of the virtues entrusted to the members) that without detachment from self, there can be no lasting Society.” (Prologue of Rule of 1835)

¹³ The Circular Letter referred to, can be found on the Society international website: www.ozanet.org

tradition for the members who occupy those positions, these – the presidents of whatever level – should continually exercise the job of authentic promoters of that collegiality within the Conference or Council they lead. This is not incompatible with an adequate exercise in the necessary and legitimate authority of each one. On the contrary, the authority, understood as service¹⁴ as our Rule indicates, should always be ready to encourage the participation of all who attend the meetings and not only of those, who are determined at times, to monopolize the floor.

We should assume that the invoking of the Holy Spirit that we make at the beginning of each one of our meetings, is real and effective and always has a response. If we do it in that manner, if we accustom ourselves to try to find in each meeting what the Holy Spirit says to us by means of the group we are made up of, the charity provided by the Conference will be always and continually renewed. He will renew it; not us. It shall be a Charity that adapts to the necessities of the moment in which the life and environment of the Conference is immersed and we shall be more useful to those who suffer. *We shall achieve a permanent foundation that is as much as to aspire to always have a place reserved at our meetings for the “Principal Member,” the true founder of the Society: The Good Lord Himself.*

No one was more obedient to the voice of the Holy Spirit than Mary¹⁵, our Mother, who our founders have already invoked asking for assistance. May she show us how to achieve today, that we also should know how to invoke at each one of our meetings, that “fiat” so that the Holy Spirit may inspire the body of which every one of our Conferences in the world should be formed.

With my prayer and affection

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XIV President General
(I.N.E.D.)

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BIOGRAPHIES, ETC., AT: <http://www.ozanet.org/>**

¹⁴ Rule of the International Council of the SSVdP. Article 3.11

¹⁵ “.....it is because of this that we have placed ourselves under the patronage of the Holy Virgin and St. Vincent de Paul, and we consecrate them to a special devotion and endeavor to follow in their paths.” Prologue of the Rule of 1835.