

Part 3: Basic Requirements for Drafting the Internal Statutes for Superior, Assimilated or Associated Councils.

In compliance with Article 7.5 of the International Statutes, these together with the Rule shall prevail over the Basic Requirements to which they give shape.

The Rule itself and the International Statutes, together with the present Basic Requirements shall serve as models for drafting the Internal Statutes of the Superior, Assimilated or Associated Councils.

THE STRUCTURE

Conferences meet frequently

B.R. 1: Members of the Society, called Vincentians, traditionally gather in communities called "Conferences", which meet regularly and frequently. (See Article 3.3.1 of the Rule).

Commentary

The Rule (3.3.1) specifies meetings "usually weekly but at least every fortnight". There are three essential dimensions of membership of our Society.

- *The horizontal dimension – towards the poor whom we seek and visit (Rule 1.2 to 1.12),*
- *The vertical dimension – towards God - the spiritual development of members (Rule 2.1 to 2.6).*
- *The support dimension and fraternal community – towards one another - unity and friendship between the members and mutual support in discerning the best way to help ((Rule 3.1 to 3.15)*

This description only expresses an emphasis, as all three dimensions are always present in all truly Vincentian activities. A weekly meeting enables all three dimensions to be constantly developed. To halve the opportunities for spiritual development etc. by meeting only every two weeks, is sad indeed. If one meeting is then missed, it will be four weeks since the last meeting attended, which also adversely affects our service to the poor and that unity and friendship which we treasure. It will often be found that where the weekly meeting is not respected, there is a misunderstanding that visiting the poor is all membership involves, with a very inadequate understanding of the importance of the spiritual dimension and support dimension – the essential

community spirit, which in reality make a marvellous difference to the effectiveness of our love for the poor.

Only those who love one another, who understand one another, those who are deeply concerned about other members of the fraternal community - the Conference, sharing both their sorrows and their joys, attain the fullest expression of a communal commitment to the poor and are a 'sign of contradiction' for the world (Lk 2:34).

Councils – the minimum number of levels

B.R. 2: Conferences are organised under different levels of Councils in the simplest manner possible.

The denomination preferred for these Councils is: Superior Council: co-ordinates and represents the general activity of all the Conferences in a particular country or geographical area. Area Council: represents groups of Conferences in a particular geographical area under the supervision of the Superior Council to which it belongs. Both Councils shall include the area they serve in their name in order to differentiate between them.

The Superior Councils determine the boundaries of the Area Councils and create new Councils when the number of Conferences they assist so requires, informing the Council General of the same and requesting their Institution.

Other Regional, Central, etc. Councils may be instituted when deemed appropriate.

Commentary

The intention is to eliminate any level of Councils which is not now essential because of changed circumstances and modern technology. Some countries have, with benefit, dispensed with the Central or Regional levels of Councils. The functions of the Councils (see Appendices 3 and 5) and their current boundaries and operation should be reviewed and changed if necessary and their effectiveness should be evaluated. If this review establishes that those in need and the members benefit from having one or more levels of Council between Area Council and Superior Council, then they should be preserved.

In other words, we should preserve as light a structure as possible, according to the circumstances in which we are working. Too many levels of Councils could reduce the effectiveness of our service to the poor and the members.

Councils are at the service of all Conferences under their jurisdiction. They help Conferences develop their spiritual

life, intensify the service of each Conference, and diversify their activities so that they will be constantly attentive to the needs of those who suffer. (For the complete criteria, see Article 3.6 of the Rule).

Commentary

See Appendix 3 – Area Councils and their functions.

In particular and without creating a parallel organisation, Councils at appropriate levels should particularly promote the Youth Committees, helping them to be fully integrated into the life of the Society.

The Youth Committees shall have the same relationship with the Council under which they operate as the rest of the Committees linked to the same Council.

Commentary

To speak about young members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is always to speak about adapting ourselves to their need for training and support in their journey through life. Any of our norms, any of our decisions, should always give the first priority to what the young members expect, request and need from the older members. To amplify what is said below about young members, see the circular letter from the President General dated 30th June 2002.

*“**Youth**” can be defined, for the Society’s purposes, as beginning at any age when a person can make a sustained contribution to Vincentian work and ending at age 30.*

*“**fully integrated**” - the members of Youth Committees will be young members who may be members of senior Conferences or of Youth Conferences. Contact details should be maintained for members of Youth Conferences which can be passed on to the President of a senior Conference when they leave the Youth Conference or move to another area. The appropriate President can then invite them to join the senior Conference,*

Young people should, of course, always be invited to Festival meetings and other Society events. They find it encouraging to be invited to give a brief report on their activities.

*“**Youth Committees**” – Superior Councils should decide at what levels of Council such Committees should ideally be established. Membership of an active Youth Committee is an excellent way to develop the talents and charisms of young members and strengthens their commitment to the Society.*

*“**the same relationship as other Committees**” – as, for instance, the Finance, Twinning Committees etc. It is normal that each Committee seeks the agreement of the Council to any strategy it proposes (always indicating the cost), to a level of expenditure below which it can make its own decisions, and the content and frequency of reporting. A Committee, and therefore a Youth Committee, should then be trusted to decide on its tactics and operate with some autonomy, but always within the agreed strategy and budget. Youth*

Committees at different Council levels, which are each related to their Council in this manner would never become a parallel organisation, because they agree their strategy not with a higher Youth Council but with the Society's duly instituted Council to which they report.

Aggregation and Institution

B.R. 3: All Conferences and Councils are full members of the Society when they are respectively Aggregated or Instituted by the Council General. (For the complete criteria, see Articles 3.8 of the Rule and 6.1 *et seq.* of the International Statutes).

Commentary

Aggregation may be requested after a Conference has been active for at least 12 months. This is such a significant development for the Conference and Council that it is customary to present the Aggregation Certificate to the Conference President at an Area Council meeting or, better still, during a Festival meeting.

CONFERENCES & THEIR WORK

Membership

B.R. 4: The Society may have different categories of members. Full members are those who voluntarily live the Conference's life of prayer and action by attending the meetings and through personal contact with those who suffer. The Internal Statutes of the Superior Councils may establish, as necessary, other categories of members who collaborate with its service to the poor. (For the complete criteria, see Article 3.1 and 6.4 of the Rule).

Commentary

"other categories of members" - for example, whilst they do not attend the meetings, Benefactors help the Society's works by their donations, and Auxiliary members, help the Society through their personal cooperation in any work for the service of those in need.

All categories of members are spiritually linked to the Society and should be invited to all Festival meetings and Conference Masses or social occasions.

The process of accepting members will vary with local custom and legislation, but should be specified in detail in the Statutes.

Conference Presidents are responsible for ensuring that the new members acquire knowledge and formation in the traditions and practices of the Society, and the necessary skills. All the other Conference members will assist the

President, who should also encourage the member to attend any training course provided with the support of the Superior Council.

Conference Meeting essentials

B.R. 5: A Conference meeting always includes the following:

- a) Opening and closing prayers, formal and spontaneous.
(A prayer to the Holy Spirit, the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary and a prayer for those whose suffering they wish to share are obligatory).

Commentary

To amplify all the following commentaries, see the circular letter from the President General dated 30th June 2001.

The opening and closing prayers should enshrine nearly all aspects of Vincentian spirituality. The prayers will only nourish our spiritual lives weekly if they are said slowly and reflectively. Gabbling prayers is simply an empty ritual. Members will be helped if, from time to time, they reflect on the meaning of each phrase of the prayers, during the spiritual reading. To say a few prayers devoutly has always been the preference of the Society, so Council General has never considered it right to impose even so worthy a prayer as the Rosary as compulsory. To include spontaneous prayer is encouraged, for any needs the members feel are important to them at the moment.

- b) A spiritual reading or meditation, on which members are always invited to comment as a means of sharing their faith and deepening their mutual understanding.

Commentary

“sharing” – there is a considerable difference between ‘discussion’, which can imply possible disagreements, and ‘sharing’. It is customary to avoid absolutely, matters of party politics or divisive criticism arising from the differences between Christian denominations or other faiths. On the other hand, issues of social justice, viewed in the light of Catholic social principles are entirely appropriate, as are any aspects of Catholic spirituality, doctrine or practice. Whilst discussion is certainly appropriate during other phases of the meeting, sharing is much more fruitful during the reflection on the spiritual reading. It implies that members say how the reading spoke to them individually, what they found inspiring or illuminating, how it could lead them to more Christ-like attitudes or actions. They may well build on the comments of others but it is not the time to challenge and disagree with others, nor the time for an academic analysis of the meaning of a passage. The Gospels are the prime source. Meditation on the Rule will bear much fruit. Lives of the saints are recommended, especially those of St. Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frederic Ozanam. ‘The Imitation of Christ’ by Thomas Kempis has stood the test of time. Catholic

(or other) papers, magazines and books can sometimes be excellent sources.

It is both courteous and beneficial if a President ensures that at every meeting the Spiritual Adviser is invited to give his views, especially near the end of the sharing, which he could sum up. Too early a comment by someone very fluent and knowledgeable can sometimes stifle comment from others.

- c) Reading and approval of the Minutes of the previous meeting, according to the notes taken by the Secretary on the matters discussed and agreed at each meeting.

Commentary

The Minutes can be thorough or short, but should at least record who was present, the action points agreed and the expenses and collection.

- d) Reading and approval of the financial report presented by the Treasurer, including the amounts of available funds and expenses.
- e) Reports on the visits made by the members since the previous meeting to families and friends in need. Discussion of ways to improve the Conference's service.

Commentary

In addition to relating facts and problems, it is very helpful for the spirituality of the Conference, if members report on anything they found to be inspiring during their visit.

It is very important that every member knows, in depth, the needs of all the friends the Conference is helping.

- f) Allocation of the visits and other tasks entrusted to each member for the following week by the President, after consultation with the Conference. Visits are preferably made in pairs.

Commentary

"allocation" – the President tries to match the nature of the visit to the skills of the members. Some of those we visit prefer to get to know nearly all the members, over a period, but visiting in a rota must still allow exceptions, to respect those who prefer visits from the same members.

“visits in pairs” – in some countries this will be made obligatory, perhaps for all visits or for visits to families but also important is the care required with especially vulnerable adults. The safety of members visiting in certain localities is another factor.

Among the other advantages of visiting in pairs are:

**Two members are likely to see different aspects of a problem and other possibilities*

** It helps to foster the friendship between members which is so important to us*

** Our Lord sent out his disciples in pairs, for mutual support and inspiration.*

g) A secret collection.

Commentary

This tradition has existed from the time of the very first Conference in 1833. It provides the opportunity for members, if they wish, to donate, secretly, the cost of certain gifts to those they visit, without making any other member feel inadequate when they are going through difficult times financially.

This is a very important tradition within the Society. Every Conference makes a secret collection and no-one knows the amount given by each member, which is known only to God. What the Conference gives is taken from the Common Fund, so the people helped do not know whether the members helping them are wealthy or poor. It is the community – the Conference as a whole, that is helping.

h) Review of any correspondence.

i) Whenever possible, the inclusion of training periods for members and communication of information about all levels of the Society.

Commentary

Every Conference, anywhere, is in a sense, representing the entire world-wide Society. This additional agenda item has been customary in a few countries which have found it beneficial. It provides the opportunity for members to get to know what is happening elsewhere in the Society, so that they really feel part of one international family. It is envisaged that only a few minutes will be added to the meeting, so if a Superior Council decides to provide some training resources for this slot, it should bear this in mind.

Visits to the poor are made in a Vincentian spirit

B.R. 6: Visits to those in need should be made in their environment, whenever possible. The contact with friends in need should always be made in a spirit of friendship, respect, cordiality, empathy and affection. It should also

promote self-sufficiency whenever possible for those who suffer and show concern for their deepest needs.

(For the complete criteria, see Articles 1.2. through 1.12 of the Rule).

Commentary

“in their environment” – it has always been our custom, whenever possible, to ‘go to the poor, to visit them in their homes, hostels, camps, or where they are sleeping rough in the street. In this way, the contrast is obvious between the Society’s open-handed offer to help, in a spirit of love and friendship, and a State activity which demands that the poor come for help to a certain location.

“whenever possible” – there are exceptions - for instance, Vincentian shops or drop-in centres, where the poor come to us for help. Such work sometimes attracts volunteers who do not wish to belong to a Conference. In those cases, some formation sessions should always be provided to ensure that they relate to the poor with the Vincentian spirit described in this article and more fully in the Rule (especially 1.7 -1.12), and that they are able to link the poor with a Conference, if this is what they wish.

Conference & Council Annual Review

B.R. 7: At least once a year, each Conference and Council must evaluate their service to the members and to the poor they visit, and find ways to provide better service. (For the complete criteria, see Article 1.6. and also Chapter 3 of the Rule).

They should also consider the new types of needs they seek to alleviate and how to find those in need.

Commentary

A meeting to review all aspects of Conference work has been found to be an excellent way to resolve difficulties and to decide the best way for the Conference to move forward.

Sometimes members will become frustrated with certain aspects, but say nothing because they do not wish to ‘rock the boat’. Loss of members and impairment of the work can result. The review meeting enables all aspects to be thoroughly discussed, so that all frustrations can be aired and suggestions discussed.

An annual Review meeting is, therefore, to become part of Conference life, and the same idea is extended to Councils. See Appendix 1 – Agenda for the Annual Conference Review Meeting, Appendix 2 – Agenda for the Annual Council Review Meeting, and Appendix 4 - Finding those in need.

At least once a year they submit a report on their activities to the Superior Council and the immediate Council to which they belong.

Commentary

Such reports are not only useful in providing the statistics needed for external publicity to create goodwill and attract new members and funding, but they are essential to enable the Councils to serve the Conferences, by indicating Conferences:

- *likely to go into abeyance due to shortage of members – they could be offered help with recruitment*
- *meeting very infrequently*
- *undertaking few visits – they could be offered help to find more people in need*
- *having a heavy expenditure – they may need funding*
- *having excessive funds which are being 'hoarded'*
- *having very little contact with the Society and the area meetings and events it promotes*

Commissioning Ceremony

B.R. 8: All members shall annually renew their promise of service to the Members and to the poor, thereby deepening the spiritual dimension of their vocation. (For the complete criteria, see Chapter 2 of the Rule).

Commentary

"annually" - *each Conference shall celebrate the renewal of the members' promise of service, preferably during a Conference Mass, but it could be conducted during a Festival Meeting.*

"promise" - *a sincerely made promise, but not a legal, civil or canonical vow.*

"deepening the spiritual dimension" - *it is recommended that a member be in the Society for at least six months before taking part in the Commissioning ceremony, as this demonstrates perseverance and it is more likely that the member has had sufficient Vincentian formation to be able to make this a meaningful commitment, in which the spiritual dimension is prominent.*

Before being Commissioned, a new member could exchange views on continued membership with the Conference President or the Spiritual Adviser. In this way, the period before the Commissioning would be, in effect, an informal probation period. Those who remain as members could be invited to share their observations and constructive suggestions with the Conference.

OFFICERS & DECISION-MAKING

Subsidiarity and Democracy

B.R. 9: The Society accepts the principles of subsidiarity and democratic consensus as the basic rules of its functioning. (For the complete criteria, see Articles 3.9 and 3.10 of the Rule).

Commentary

“democratic” - in the International Statutes of the Society, care has been taken to state whether a quorum is required and, if so, what is the quorum, who can vote and what majority is required. The Internal Statutes should also make these matters clear.

Our custom is to allow Presidents to make their own distinctive contribution, but they are expected to listen to the members of their Conference or Council. If, after prayer and serious open-minded discussion, the consensus or majority vote is clearly against the President’s view, he will fully accept the democratic decision.

At Council level, if both the majority of the Board and the voting members are against a proposal, this should always be decisive. If, however, the Board are unanimously in favour but a majority of voting members are against a proposal, the proposal is defeated, but there is another possibility in that unusual situation. Would the Council agree to allow the scheme to go ahead for a limited period or on a limited basis? It could then be evaluated and either withdrawn, or, in the light of a positive experience, sustained. This will ensure that a President can lead more effectively, whilst still being bound, finally, by democratic decisions.

Servant leadership

B.R. 10: Offices in the Society, at any level, are always to be accepted as service to Christ, the members and the poor. (For the complete criteria, see Article 2.6 of the Rule).

Commentary

“service” – the President and other officers carefully avoid the temptation to dominate. “You know that those who .. rule over the Gentiles lord it over them .. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (Mk 10:42b-44).

By tradition, within the Society, we say that the service given by every Conference and Council is better or worse depending on the example given by the President. In fact, the quality of the service, of the commitment, of the

sacrifice, is affected by the members' response to the President's example, which strongly influences the life of the Conference or Council.

Board members and other officers

B.R. 11: For a specific period of time the Society chooses members for the various Council and Conference offices, who will carry out their tasks with the same dedication with which they work within their own Conference.

Commentary

"for a period of time" – the advantage of an appointment 'for a limited renewable period' is that changes in the officers can be made more harmoniously if it becomes necessary (perhaps because the office now requires different skills). It also gives the President the opportunity to give valuable experience to someone who could be a possible successor, who may not have been known to the President when the first appointments were made.

"within their own Conference" - It is very important that all officers, including the Superior Council President, belong to a Conference and still attend it and visit the poor as often as possible. It is a beautiful custom, which ensures that everyone operates at the 'grass-roots' level and 'keeps their feet on the ground'. It is also an expression of humility as even the Superior Council President will gladly accept the authority of the Conference President to allocate the work to be done.

Similar to the Board of the Council General, each Conference or Council should have at least a Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer appointed by the President after consultation with the members. (For the complete criteria, see Article 3.16 of the International Statutes).

Commentary

The Vice President exercises all the functions of the President when the latter is absent. This ensures that the Society can continue to operate effectively, especially in times of a lengthy absence. In particular, the Vice President usually attends the meeting of the next higher Council, whenever the President is unable to attend.

"consultation" could, if preferred, be by inviting members to suggest privately who they think would be the most suitable persons for these roles.

"at least" – implies that other officers may be appointed, as the President wishes. To ensure democracy, however, in a Society in which decisions are often made by consensus, some Superior Councils have stipulated that there will always be more elected Presidents than appointed officers, in any Council. Appointed officers should ensure that the elected Presidents are given more opportunity than themselves, to express their views.

To safeguard the good reputation of the Conference or Council and therefore, that of the Society itself, appointees should not be relatives of the person empowered to make the appointments.

Commentary

This article is intended to ensure that the offices are spread widely among the members and not kept within one family. It is also a prudent safeguard for auditing reasons.

The President is elected by secret ballot by the full members of the Conference or Council, in accordance with the legal procedures of the country where the Society is established. (For the complete criteria, see Article 3.11 of the Rule).

Commentary

The date of the election should be made known in advance to all full members, and those who cannot attend should have the opportunity to hand in their vote in a sealed envelope.

There should be two members who count the votes, neither of them being candidates. The total electoral procedure for Councils and Conferences should include the appropriate elements covered in the election of the President General (see 3.6 to 3.9 of the International Statutes).

If there are more than two candidates, a second round is recommended between the two candidates who have the most votes. (see International Statutes 3.9.2).

The maximum term of office for Presidents of Superior Councils or those of any other level should not exceed six years.

Commentary

A shorter period may be stipulated. The periods for different levels of Councils or Conferences could be different if so desired.

Under exceptional circumstances, a Superior Council may request the Council General's permission to extend the term of office of its President. The Council General, through the Permanent Section, will authorise or refuse such a possibility and, in case of its authorisation, will set the maximum period of time for that extension.

Councils, at any level, have the same power as Council General to authorise a second term of office for the Presidents of the Councils and Conferences they co-ordinate on written request of the same. By virtue of the above, Council and Conferences Presidents cannot be re-elected without requesting and obtaining the agreement of the next higher Council.

Commentary

“exceptional” - It is envisaged that this extension would be very rare. One of the President's main tasks is to identify possible successors and to provide them with opportunities which will prepare them for a future role. It will help if all members are aware that it is part of our spirituality to be willing to take office at some time, assuming the member has the appropriate skills and that family and work commitments permit. This is implied in the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30), and Spiritual Advisors can help to generate this willingness.

On the other hand, to cling to office is against our spirit, against humility. At the end of their term of office, Presidents should rather, 'prefer others to themselves' (Phil 2:3, Rom 12:10), enabling others to exercise their gifts and make their own distinctive contribution.

“will set the maximum period for that extension” – this should be a short as possible, reflecting the circumstances – all levels of Council must set a maximum term of extension.

It is recommended that members should not hold the office of President after the age of 70.

Commentary

In some countries it is not possible to state an age limit.

Where it is legally possible, the recommendation is that an age limit should be stated, which should not exceed 70.

On balance, the Society's view is that for the role of President there are more advantages than disadvantages in having an age limit. It ensures that we remember the part played by young people in the foundation of the Society. It will encourage younger members to join, as they will become aware that the Society is still dynamic and that they can play a significant leadership role in the Society. It will help to keep the Society young.

It is also sometimes the case that a person who was once full of energy and good health, may be in a much poorer state of health over the age of 70. In such cases, it is much more sensitive to suggest that they should step down from office because of the rules rather than because they are no longer able to be an effective President.

If all members of a Conference are over 70, it should not be closed down, but the Area Council should help it organise a recruitment campaign, with a view to

handing over the Presidency to a younger member as quickly as possible. This could be within a few months in some cases.

There is no reason why experienced members over the age of 70 should not be considered for other offices in the Society, because a President who is a servant leader identifies the natural gifts and spiritual charisms of members and provides opportunities, whenever possible, for these gifts to be used for the good of the poor and the Society.

The Society must remain voluntary

B.R. 12: Employees of the Society, of its Special Works or of organisations controlled by the Society, may not be elected or appointed to any office within the Society. They may, however, be members and hold offices in a Conference, provided it is not the Conference responsible for the work in which they are employed. (For the complete criteria, see Article 1.12.2 of the International Statutes).

Commentary

This is a wise provision to maintain the voluntary character of the Society and to avoid conflicts of interest.

Article 1.12.2 of the international Statutes indicates that employees may, when invited, attend meetings of the Special Work or Council to which they report, and participate in discussions relevant to their function, without, of course, having a right to vote.

*“**may be members... of a Conference**” – some employees wish to participate fully in the work of a Conference (not responsible for their work). It can only be of benefit to the poor and the employee if they fully absorb and put into practice the spirit of the Society in this way. It will certainly bring an additional dimension to their work for the Society.*

The Spiritual Adviser in a lay Society

B.R. 13: As traditional since the beginning of the Conferences, a Spiritual Adviser should be appointed to foster spiritual life within the Conferences and Councils. Priests, permanent deacons and other members of religious orders are not eligible to be appointed to any office outside of their spiritual work. (For complete criteria, see Article 3.16.2 of the International Statutes).

Commentary

*“**to foster spiritual life**” – The Society, and the motivation of the members, is not merely humanism. Our work is not just another form of social work. From the beginning, the members have sought to follow Jesus Christ by serving him in the poor (Rule 1.2, 2.1 to 2.6). A Spiritual Adviser must, of course, foster the*

spiritual life in the way he or she feels guided towards by the Holy Spirit, but in all cases, the spirit of the Rule should be promoted in its entirety and be the basis for any programme of spiritual development.

At Council level, although chosen by the President, the Spiritual Adviser must obtain agreement from his or her ecclesiastical superior.

Should a priest, permanent deacon or other member of a religious order not be available for the spiritual advisory function, the President of the Council or Conference, after consultation with the President of the Council to which it belongs, may appoint a member who has had the appropriate training as Spiritual Advisor.

Commentary

“appoint a member” – this recognises that in some countries, the reducing number of priests makes it difficult for them to take on this role as a regular commitment.

“after consultation” – it will usually be prudent for a Conference President to discuss this appointment also with the parish priest.

“appropriate training” – the Superior Council should ensure that such training is available. Spiritual readings or other resources suitable for use in Conferences and Councils should be identified or provided.

PROMOTING UNITY WITHIN AND BETWEEN CONFERENCES

‘Festival Meetings’ & Conference Masses should be maintained

B.R. 14: Conferences and Councils celebrate liturgical ceremonies, particularly Vincentian ceremonies, together throughout the year, endeavouring to maintain a spirit of profound moral and material friendship among the members. (For the complete criteria, see Chapters 2 and 3 of the Rule).

Commentary

There are two situations envisaged.

1). **‘Festival Meetings’** of the members within one or more Councils areas. A minimum number per year should be specified, in accordance with local custom, but it is difficult to see how the purposes can be achieved if there are not at least two annually.

These ‘festival meetings’ have been regarded, from the Society’s earliest days, as a means of promoting friendship between the members, which has always been treasured. It leads to a sharing of experience and good practice and to

mutual support when Conferences are going through difficult times. Sometimes an external speaker will provide information that is useful for members in their work. Such meetings are one way to extend the horizons of the members, so that they never focus entirely on their own Conference but feel part of a much larger family, the Vincentian family throughout the world.

“liturgical ceremonies” – it is customary to have Mass, Benediction or some other ceremony during Festival meetings.

“Vincentian ceremonies” refers to the liturgical ceremonies regarded as especially meaningful to Vincentians. These are:

- *the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the liturgical year*
- *the Immaculate Conception on 8th December, because Mary is our Patroness*
- *the first Sunday of Lent (because in Lent the need to undertake more charitable works is emphasised along with the need for more prayer and penance)*
- *the Birthday of Blessed Frederic Ozanam (23rd April)*
- *the liturgical Feast Day of Blessed Frederic Ozanam (9th September)*
- *the Feast Day of St. Vincent (27th September)*
- *the liturgical Feast Day of Blessed Rosalie Rendu (9th November)*

2) Conference Masses. In many countries, these are customary. Ideally there should be at least one a year, for the members, both full and auxiliary, including spouses and children, during which the Commissioning Ceremony could be held. Former members of the Conference who have died could be especially remembered on this occasion, perhaps mentioning, simply and without exaggeration, an aspect of their Vincentian work that was an inspiration to other members. This would be an expression of our continuing love for them. We could remember also those we visited who have died, who will, according to St. Vincent, be there to welcome us when we go to our eternal reward.

Many Conferences identify a parish Mass every quarter which all the members try to attend. They offer the Mass for the poor and for the Society and pray that their own work may be ever more fruitful.

Since 1870, it has been customary for Conferences to join a “vast crusade of supplication and prayers” by having the ‘Mass of the four intentions’ offered for the intentions of the Church, the Pope, our Society and our own country (President General M. Calon reminded the Society of this custom in 1911).

AUTHORITIES OF PRESIDENTS OF SUPERIOR COUNCILS

To suspend members, Conference & Councils

B.R. 15: In accordance with Article 6.8 of the International Statutes, the Presidents of s Superior Councils have the delegated authority to suspend members, Conferences or

Councils of the Society within their area as a precautionary measure.

When the Superior Council President has made such a decision, the member, Conference or Council suspended as a precautionary measure will cease to exercise any office and may not act on behalf of the Society under any circumstances. However, such member, Conference or Council is entitled to appeal to the President General. (For the complete criteria, see Article 6.8.1 of the International Statutes).

The suspended member may appeal to the relevant Superior Council so that the case may be reviewed at a plenary meeting of the latter, which will listen to the member and make its decision by vote. Should the member choose this process, the appeal to the President General will remain pending.

Commentary

“delegated authority” – the authority to suspend or exclude belongs exclusively to the President General(see Article 6.7 of the International Statutes). This delegated authority is considered essential to provide an immediate response to an emergency, to protect the Society and those we visit. Whilst the suspension is in effect, the situation can be investigated, quickly and thoroughly, and resolved, if possible. Extreme care is taken to ensure that the investigation is not only fair but seen to be fair. The members concerned will always be treated with sensitivity and love, as we are all aware of our own frailty. Assistance from a small Conciliation Committee may be appropriate (see B.R.17). The appeal procedure provides the necessary guarantee of consistency and fairness.

“suspended member” – whereas the appeal of Conferences and Councils is to the President General, in the case of a member, the appeal route would normally be first to the Superior Council and only after that, to the President General.

To annul the election of a President

B.R. 16: Presidents of Superior Councils may, for serious reasons, annul the election of a member as President of a Conference or Council. Such member will immediately cease to exercise the office and may appeal to the Superior Council Assembly.

Commentary

This is another authority to protect the Society. It could be invoked if the President was unwell or was behaving in a way that was causing grave difficulties which seriously impaired the ability of the Conference or Council to carry out its work for the poor. The difficulty may be due to various causes such as a medical condition, physical or mental, complete lack of available time due to personal circumstances, lack of the conciliatory spirit which a servant leader needs to maintain harmony, or even insufficient ability for the role. Normally, a President with these difficulties could be persuaded to step down, by the Conference or Council members, proceeding with sensitivity and charity. If he or she refuses to resign and the situation becomes unworkable, and the next higher Council also cannot resolve the situation, the authority in this article may be invoked.

During discussions with a higher Council and during an appeal, which may be referred to a Conciliation Commission (see B.R.17), the appellant should have the right to be accompanied by another member of the Society who could, if necessary, speak on his or her behalf.

May establish a Conciliation Committee

B.R. 17: The Superior Councils may establish a Conciliation Committee, to which Councils, Conferences and members may appeal.

Commentary

“A Conciliation Committee” – this has been found to be of great value by several countries. It may only have three or four members, of great experience in Vincentian matters, with relevant skills and a conciliatory spirit. It should have the capacity to quickly establish the facts, be able calmly to explain the views of the two parties to each other, and to propose solutions which are consistent with the spirit of the Rule and the Statutes. Sustained prayer, good will and a desire to reconcile, will usually resolve the issue satisfactorily. (See Appendix 6 – The Conciliation Committee, and Appendix 7 – Guidelines for resolving disputed with charity).

Councils, Conferences and members trust the integrity of the Society and its life of prayer and communion, so that they need not appeal to civil or legal authorities to resolve internal differences.

Any member, Conference or Council which uses means other than those provided by the Society to resolve internal disputes renounces Vincentian communion and leaves the Society. (For the complete criteria, see Article 6.11.1 of the International Statutes).

Commentary

It is not legally possible to prevent members taking Society matters before the courts, but this paragraph makes it quite clear that it is completely against the spirit of the Society to do so, and states the inevitable consequences, unless express authorisation from the Council General is obtained (see article 6.11.1 of the International Statutes). The Society is perfectly capable of resolving nearly all issues 'within the family', using the Society's own structures and, if necessary, the Conciliation Committee set up under this article. The Society's ability to do the Lord's work will be damaged by any such public manifestation of disunity. It will succeed in its mission if its members are seen to be disciples of Our Lord; "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35).

This article does not, however, relate to criminal misconduct. In the event of fraud or other criminal misconduct, the Society will always cooperate fully with the civil authorities. It is important that the Superior Council President should be made aware of any such instance at the earliest possible moment, so that the best advice can be obtained and that possible damage to the Society's reputation is kept to a minimum. If such a matter refers to the Society at Superior Council level, the President General should be immediately informed.

TRANSPARENCY IN USING MONEY AND OTHER ASSETS

Annual finance & activity reports are normally publicised by Superior Councils, other Councils & Conferences

B.R. 18: The Society shall preserve its good reputation for honesty and responsible stewardship. It will produce finance and activity reports at least annually.

Commentary

Such reports are a legal requirement in some countries under laws which govern Charitable Organisations, but even where this is not the case, such reports are essential if the Superior Council and Council General are to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the Society and the scope of its work, with a view to offering assistance and serving more effectively. The facts will often be an inspiration to other Conferences and Councils.

Whenever circumstances permit, these reports should be publicised externally and internally and be made available to all members and the public in general.

These reports should be sent to the diocesan Bishops and the Civil Authorities for their information whenever possible. (For the complete criteria, see Article 3.19.1 of the International Statutes).

Commentary

“publicised externally” – there is a temptation to misinterpret the concept of the humility of the Society and publicise little or nothing externally. The result is that many of the public feel we are almost a ‘secret society’. Our mission to let the world know that Christ is our inspiration, requires us not to hide our light “under a bushel”, but to let our light “so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:15-16). We can and should publicise the Society’s work and sometimes the media will mention the names of members, although we never seek such personal publicity. We are, however, careful not to exaggerate the impact we make. The truth is eloquent enough.

These reports, together with events, activities, and inspirational anecdotes from all levels of the Society should, therefore, be publicised both internally and externally. In addition to its main purpose of ‘spreading the gospel’, such publicity generates goodwill towards the Society.

Councils and Conferences should prepare similar reports.

Commentary

It is highly desirable that a Conference should produce an annual report for the Parish, thanking the parishioners for their contributions, normally without mentioning individual benefactors. Explaining the activities of the Conference and how the money has been spent, in general terms, within the parish, elsewhere in the country or within the national and international Twinings, will bring home to parishioners the international scope of the Society, and create good will which should bear fruit when potential new members are contacted and it may encourage more generous donations. The reports should avoid mentioning individual members, if possible, except for contact purposes.

The Superior, Assimilated and Associated Councils will be, to all legal effects, the sole responsible parties before any national or international jurisdiction for the events occurring within their respective areas. (For the complete criteria, see Article 1.7.2 of the International Statutes).

Commentary

This article protects Council General against being involved unnecessarily and unjustly in litigation which is properly attributed to other Councils over events occurring without the full and proven knowledge and agreement of Council General.

Property and the distribution of unused funds

B.R. 19: Conferences and Councils zealously manage and maintain the Society's assets.

Commentary

“zealously manage and maintain” – this refers to money, investments, equipment and buildings. Buildings and essential equipment should be maintained in a safe condition.

A policy of “ethical investment” should be followed, to ensure that the Society is not investing in Companies which operate in a way that seriously disadvantages the poor or which is contrary to the values of the Society.

The authority to dispose of, purchase, mortgage, lease or rent the Society's real estate assets shall remain exclusively with Superior or Assimilated Councils, which may delegate this authority in specific cases.

Commentary

This article should effectively ensure the following:

- * All properties owned are listed.*
- * The location of all deeds or leases is known – ideally the Society will keep a copy in a central location.*
- * The terms of the deeds and leases are within the parameters laid down by the Society. (There have been instances of clauses which involved the Society in severe and unreasonable liabilities).*
- * All properties comply with the legal health and safety requirements or with standards set by the Superior Council.*
- * The insurances are renewed annually, whenever appropriate, and covered for the risks which the Superior Council has decided to insure.*

Faithful to the spirit of non-accumulation of wealth, the Superior, Assimilated and Associated Councils will determine annually the percentage of the unused funds of each of the Councils or Conferences within their area which will be made available to them. The Superior, Assimilated and Associated Councils will determine the direct allocation of such funds, which may not be hoarded as a capital sum, to the service of the poor in their own area or abroad, in the poorest areas of the world. (For the complete criteria, see Articles 3.14 and 3.15 of the Rule).

Commentary

This is an effective way to resolve an issue which several countries have identified.

*“**unused funds**” – this may need to be defined – e.g. funds more than x% over the average expenditure of the Conference or Council for the last two years, so that the meaning is, effectively, ‘funds which are likely to be unused’.*

*“**made available to them**” – not used for administration, but re-distributed to the poor, a concept central to the Society which springs straight from the Gospel. The intention is to identify substantial funds and achieve more good with them. It is not the intention to impose excessive bureaucracy (against the Rule – see 3.9), by moving small amounts of surplus from all Conferences and all Councils. It would, therefore, be in the spirit of this Requirement to specify a level of Conference or Council funds over which this Requirement would take effect.*

The Society and each Conference must avoid hoarding money. One of the enormous advantages of our organisation, is that we have no binding financial obligation to create significant reserve funds. On the contrary, except in extraordinary, occasional instances, the Conferences should distribute the money they collect, among the friends in need whom they help, and if, finally, some resources remain, they should put this amount at the disposal of other Conferences which lack resources, or into funds for disasters, Twinings or special works. This is true Vincentian fraternity and it must represent, for each member, Conference and Council, an ideal to be attained.

Collections for the poor and to maintain the structures

B.R. 20: Each Conference shall assume its responsibility in assisting other Conferences and Councils with greater needs. Likewise, Conferences should feel responsible for the maintenance of the all levels of the structure of the Society. In order to achieve this, they must take up special collections in the spirit of friendship, solidarity and sharing. These are recommended at least quarterly and may be allocated as follows: in the first quarter, an Internal Solidarity collection for the poorer Conferences within the same Superior, Assimilated or Associated Councils; in the second quarter, a collection for External Solidarity for the poorer Conferences in other areas of the world; in the third quarter, a collection in solidarity with the Structural expenses of the Councils to which the Conference belongs, to be distributed by the Superior, Assimilated or Associated Council and, in the fourth quarter, a collection allocated for the Structural expenses of the Council General.

Other means of financing such objectives may be contemplated in certain countries.

Commentary

"may be allocated" – not necessarily in the way suggested, but this is a serious suggestion which is felt to have strong advantages. This does not exclude collections being held for other purposes, or special funds being set up to which contributions can be sent. The International Statutes do, however, assume a 'personal contribution of each member of the Society, through secret collection in the last quarter of each year, as a sign of solidarity with the Council General' (see 3.21.1).

"other means" – This could apply if, for instance, a country has developed a 'tithing' system which works well, whereby a certain percentage of specified income is required from each Conference, to be distributed throughout the structure for the benefit both of the poor and the maintenance of essential Society structures.

Council Presidents' right to audit and to see correspondence

B.R. 21: When deemed appropriate, Council Presidents should authorise audits of the Conferences, Councils and Special Work under the auspices of their Council.

Commentary

"audits" – each Superior Council will stipulate the levels at which various degrees of annual audit are required. For small amounts, audit by another member of the Conference or Council may be sufficient. For larger amounts, audit by an independent qualified Accountant may be justified. For very large amounts, the intervention of the Society's main Auditors may be necessary. Even if the law does not require annual audits, the Society certainly should do so.

This Requirement enables Council Presidents to authorise audits at any time, in addition to the annual audit, whenever they feel there is the need.

The President of the Council to which any of the Society's Special Works belongs, shall be entitled, after due consultation with the Superior Council and evaluation of the legal consequences, to replace the members of the Board of that Special Work and any of its employees regardless of their functions. (For complete criteria, see Article 1.12 of these International Statutes).

Commentary

“Special Works” - It is essential that a Special Work remains loyal to the policies and strategies agreed by the Council to which it reports. It is normal that the Council will, after consultation with the Special Work, determine the policies, strategy and budget of the Special Work, together with the frequency and content of reporting, whilst delegating authority to it for the day-to-day operation. There is a possibility of the Special Work refusing to recognise this role of the Council. This can occur, for instance, if its Management Committee contains a majority of non-Vincentians, or if it becomes a separate legal entity with trustees who reject the decisions of the Council about how it should function or develop, or about matters to do with the buildings, vehicles, Health and Safety issues, etc.

This paragraph provides a necessary safeguard to ensure that such harmonious and fruitful cooperation remains possible. If the Special Work has its own Constitution, it will be necessary for some clauses to be added, if this is legally possible, to recognise the right of the Council to change the officers and members of the Special Work's management Committee or Conference (if it is run by a Conference).

Council Presidents are also entitled to have access to all correspondence sent by any Conference on behalf of the Society. This same authorisation is applicable to any Council with regard to the other Councils under its auspices

Commentary

It is considered essential for a Council President to have this right, especially where correspondence has been sent to external bodies, civil authorities etc. The intention is not to stifle good initiatives, which are usually to be applauded, but to provide assistance in conciliation where views have been expressed that are quite contrary to the Society's policy or where methods have been used which are not in keeping with our spirit.

Refund of expenses

B.R. 22: Vincentians entrusted to undertake previously and duly authorised offices, missions or tasks for the Society are entitled to the refund of the expenses incurred.

Commentary

Not only are they entitled to the refund of expenses, but it has been the Society's constant tradition that members should reclaim all expenses. This ensures that no members, however poor, need feel inferior to the members who are better off, or feel inclined to leave the Society because they cannot afford to belong to it. The value of members to the Society in the work for the poor is not based on wealth but on the empathy, love, understanding, and

spiritual qualities which they bring to their work for poor and to their relationships with other members.

If a member wishes to make an anonymous donation of part or all of the expenses he/she has claimed, there is always the possibility of using the secret collection for this purpose. This is a beautiful illustration of the Gospel in practice - "Truly, I say to you, when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt 6:3-4).

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Note: The Superior, Assimilated or Associated Councils must take the present Requirements into consideration when drafting their own Statutes in order for these to be approved in accordance with the philosophy of the Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Once the Statutes are drawn up and before their submission to the civil authorities of each country, the text must receive prior approval from the Permanent Section of the Council General.