



# **RULE OF THE CONFEDERATION INTERNATIONAL OF THE SOCIETY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL**

## **1. ORIGINS OF THE SOCIETY AND SERVICE TO THE POOR**

### **1.1 Origins**

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a worldwide Christian community, founded in Paris in 1833, by a group of young Catholic lay people and an older person, who joined together to create the first Conference. The Society wishes to remember them all with gratitude, as they set an example of dedication to the poor and to the Church. From Le Taillandier, who received the first inspiration, to Blessed Frederic Ozanam, Paul Lamache, François Lallier, Jules Deveaux, Félix Clavé, all of them knew, in their humility, how to seek the wise advice and support of the one who would become the first President General of the flourishing Society, Emmanuel Bailly.

The Holy Spirit was undoubtedly present in all of them at the founding of the Society, fostering the charisms of each one. Among them, Blessed Frederic Ozanam was a radiant source of inspiration.

The Society has been Catholic from its origins. It remains an international Catholic voluntary organisation of lay people, men and women.

*Commentary.-This first article seeks, in addition to making a firm declaration of its Christian and Catholic faith from its very origins, to make a hymn to the laity's capacity to honour the commitments acquired in Baptism. Those young people, whose names are quoted for the first time in our Rule, were more than one hundred years ahead of their time concerning the obligation of the laity to extend the Kingdom, which the Second Vatican Council would later emphasise.*

*The Holy Spirit was also present in the first Conference as a group, not only in each individual, as the bond of their unity, ensuring that the various charisms they were given were precisely those necessary for the Conference to achieve the mission willed for it by God. It is the founders' response to the Holy Spirit's inspiration, which enables the Society to help us, in our time, to grow every day, as human beings and spiritually, in devotion to the poor.*

## **PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF OUR SERVICE**

### **1.2 The Vincentian Vocation**

The vocation of the Society's members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope.

*Commentary.-Belonging to a Conference is a vocation in itself: a vocation of personal contact with Christ in the Poor. The predominant feature of this contact must always be compassion and the will to free people from their burdens: an effort to build the coming*



Kingdom. Personal contact with the suffering is the most obvious distinctive characteristic of the Vincentian ministry. We bring unconditional love to the poor and seek to love in the way Jesus loved, because "the first vocation of the Christian is to follow Jesus" (CCC2232). "Vincentians serve in hope". What air is to the lungs, so is hope to the human spirit. We have a real hope that our work will make a difference, both in the lives of those we visit and in a mysterious way, in the world at large. If we go through difficulties, we remember that "(hope) affords us joy even under trial" (CCC1820).

### **1.3 Any form of personal help...**

No work of charity is foreign to the Society. It includes any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation and promotes human dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions.

*Commentary.-This is also one of the basic distinctive characteristics of the Conferences: any form of help. From its origins, the Society has claimed that the freedom of action of each Conference makes it possible to adapt to the specific needs of those it visits, serving through personal contact.*

*"promotes .. personal integrity"*

*"True development concerns the whole man. It is concerned with increasing each person's ability to respond to his vocation and hence to God's call" (cf. CA 29) (CCC2461).*

*Poor is the one who has no option to choose.*

### **1.4...to anyone in need**

The Society serves those in need regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender, or political opinions.

*Commentary.-Members do not judge. To judge is reserved to God who sees deep into every person's heart. We serve, considering what each person needs, in keeping with what they themselves consider they lack, which we will not always understand. Vincentians do not impose: they serve in hope and wish to be able to influence by the example of their lives. "Who does not know that among the poor, very often, emotional and spiritual suffering is more acute than material poverty? What saddens them most is that there should not be a friendly hand holding theirs, nor a heart beating with theirs" (Introduction to the Manual 1845).*

*We should avoid the danger of forgetting those closest to us: our family, other members and friends. There is the danger that, when attending the poor, we become insensitive towards the pain of those nearest to us.*

### **1.5 To Seek Out the Poor**

Vincentians strive to seek out and find those in need and the forgotten, the victims of exclusion or adversity.

*Commentary.-This article implies a positive initiative to seek and find the poor, rather than being content with the list of people we currently help. There is a clear need to visit "**the forgotten**". We should not expect that the poor will come to us. On the contrary, it is we who should go to encounter them and devote ourselves to share their poverty and their sorrow. Vincentians should always retain their capacity to imagine and observe,*



*working continuously to discover the new forms of suffering that threaten people at every moment.*

## **1.6 Adaptation to a Changing World**

Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty that may be identified or anticipated. It gives priority to the poorest of the poor and to those who are most rejected by society.

*Commentary-. -To give priority to the poorest of the poor"*

*Indeed, the Conferences in their daily work must give priority to the poorest of the poor. To them, precisely to them, they have to bring comfort, to reach out and share their suffering. (See 1.5 and Commentary). Each Conference and each member, must not forget the difficulty of identifying who are the poorest of the poor. Sometimes, as stated elsewhere, not only financial poverty but emotional and spiritual suffering may result in people being rejected and becoming isolated.*

## **OUR PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH THE POOR**

### **1.7 Prayer Before Personal Encounters or Visits**

Vincentians pray that the Holy Spirit may guide them during their visits and make them channels for the peace and joy of Christ.

*Commentary.-We are unable to achieve anything of eternal value on our own, without the assistance of God Himself (Jn 15:5). Prayer, individual and communal, is a fundamental need when the Conferences and each Vincentian undertake any action. The Society's logo: "serviens in spe", always reminds us of the need for hope in our service: a service impossible without deep prayer and reflection, that should be fostered by the community that each Conference is.*

*The tradition in the Society, established by the first Conferences, shows us the great value of the "Visit before the visit", prior to personal contact: the Visit to the Blessed Sacrament in the House of God where, with a humble attitude, we will put ourselves at his disposal in order to be his eyes, his hands and his understanding in the subsequent contact with the poor. If that is not always possible, some moments of inner recollection are absolutely necessary: recollection to ask the Holy Spirit for his gifts: Wisdom to understand the situation, its priorities and the deeper needs; Fortitude to persevere, not to give up; Counsel to tackle the problem appropriately; Piety to feel, to feel compassion, which is nothing other than feeling what the other feels; Reverence and awe of God to visit with humility, with the humility that recognises we are ourselves finite human beings who beseech Providence for those who are our brothers and sisters. Children of God and Temples of the Holy Spirit, they and we are, therefore, equal in dignity no matter what distress they feel or how much misery surrounds them.*

### **1.8 Reverence for the poor**

Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully, listening to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity, for we are all created in God's image. In the poor, they see the suffering Christ.



Members observe the utmost confidentiality in the provision of material and any other type of support.

*Commentary.-This joy should not be tarnished by the pain caused in us by the very suffering of the friend in need whom we are trying to comfort. Cheerfulness is a Christian characteristic and each Vincentian should nurture it. Vincentians respect the views and aspirations of each of the human beings in need whom they encounter. It is their needs, their longings we seek to meet. Sometimes, they will even be far away from our own scale of values; from our scale of needs. Only gentleness and example will be useful to bring about a change; never any imposition. "Another point that also deserves our attention is the discretion that should accompany zeal for the salvation of souls. Fervour is not always holy, nor is it always inspired by God. Not every moment is appropriate for new ideas and Christian teachings to penetrate hearts; it is necessary to wait for God's time and to be patient, as He himself is" (Rule, 1835, PC)*

### **1.9 Empathy**

Vincentians endeavour to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve. Rather, they seek to understand them as they would a brother or sister.

*Commentary.-Sharing is not possible without friendship. The extension of the Kingdom is not possible unless we are aware of our own frailty. Let us be thankful for our faith; for the call we receive; for having the opportunity of becoming close to Christ in the poor we serve; for being able to avoid judging; for being always available to attend to our brothers' needs. "...the member mixes his tears with those of the poor and with patience and love he makes Christian friendship spring up in that heart." (Introduction to the Manual, 1845).*

### **1.10 Promotion of self-sufficiency**

Vincentians endeavour to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and that of their local community.

*Commentary.-Conferences do not wish poverty to exist. For this reason, it is implied that they fight against this unjust situation. Nevertheless, the poor should be the ones to find their own path. We, Vincentians, will accompany them wherever they wish to go. Promoting self-sufficiency and the awareness by those who suffer, that they have the ability to overcome suffering, is a basic task which can never be given up by Vincentians. (See 7.9).*

### **1.11 Concerns for deeper needs and spirituality**

Vincentians are sincerely concerned with the deeper needs and the spiritual well-being of those they help, always observing a profound respect for their conscience and the faith they believe in, listening and understanding with their hearts, beyond both words and appearances.

Vincentians serve in hope. They in discovering the spirit of prayer in the poor, for in the silence, the poor can perceive God's Plan for every person.



The acceptance of God's Plan leads each one to nurture the seeds of love, generosity, reconciliation and inner peace in themselves, their families and all those whose lives they touch. Vincentians are privileged to foster these signs of the presence of Risen Christ in the poor and among themselves.

*Commentary.-We encourage them to improve their life and we try to show them the existence of a different kind of life and spiritual values, always respecting their own values.*

*"profound respect" : That does not mean complicity or silence when we witness situations that are intrinsically perverse or sinful. Respect for the Gospel obliges us to state, without imposition, without contempt, our own moral vision of the world, even when this is opposite to the values of the poor whom we are trying to serve. The Vincentian, despite a deep respect for the decisions of the poor person, cannot give up proclaiming the Word of Life. He cannot give up sharing with others the best of himself: his faith. "Let us avoid arguments with the poor, not being offended if they do not accept our advice nor try to oblige them to accept it with an air of authority: let us be satisfied with suggesting to them the pattern of behaviour that seems good to us, and having encouraged them to follow it, leave it to God to enable our words to bear fruit, if this is His Holy Will" (Rule, 1835, PR).*

*On the other hand, we cannot and we should not forget that very often when people call poverty God's will, it is not his will at all, but is only the product of our deficiencies when distributing the Earth's resources; the result of not loving each other as Christ Himself taught us to do.*

*"signs of the presence of the Risen Christ": In the commentary on 1.8, the focus is on seeing "the Suffering Christ" in the sufferings of the people we visit.*

*In 1.11, Vincentians are encouraged to see the "signs of the presence of the Risen Christ" in the virtues of those we visit, especially when there has been a transformation of an attitude or of actions, which is a sure sign of grace, and a confirmation that "Christians ... participate in the life of the Risen Lord" (CCC1694).*

## **1.12 Gratitude to those we visit**

Vincentians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit. They recognise that the fruit of their labours springs, not from themselves, but especially from God and from the poor they serve.

*Commentary.-Many Conferences, at the end of their meetings, thank God for the good they receive from those who suffer. It is a great truth that, in our contact with the poor, we receive much more than we can bring them with our poor donations. Only the Lord's help, only His assistance obtained through deep prayer, individual and communal, can make us useful to those we try to serve. "Many times, the member gains more benefit himself from what he hears than is produced by what he says" (F.Lallier, circular to the Conferences, August 1837)*

## **2. VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY & VOCATION**

**Faith in Christ and the Life of Grace**



**"Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Rom. 5, 1-2).**

## **2.1 Love in Union with Christ**

Convinced of the truth of the Apostle St. Paul's words, Vincentians seek to draw closer to Christ. They hope that someday it will be no longer they who love, but Christ who loves through them (Gal 2,20 "... **I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God**"), and that even now, in their caring, the poor may catch a glimpse of God's great love for them.

*Commentary.-Our starting point is the conviction that the Lord is infinitely good, he who has given us the gift of salvation through His sacrifice. What can we do to repay, with all our imperfections, such devotion from God Himself? We can only try to be a pale reflection of His Love, trying to grow every day in that Love for all people which He taught us. We know that we will only manage to do so if every one of us, day by day, at every moment, tries to discover in each of our actions, what Our Lord himself would do in the specific situation with which we are faced. For this, it is necessary to know and pray the scriptures, where we find: "The Holy Spirit, which the Father will send in my name, .. will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I (Jesus) have said to you" (Jn 14:26).*

## **2.2 The journey together towards holiness**

Vincentians are called to journey together towards holiness, because true holiness is perfect union with Christ and the perfection of love, which is central to their vocation and the source of its fruitfulness. They aspire to burn with the love of God as revealed by Christ and to deepen their own faith and fidelity.

Vincentians are aware of their own brokenness and need for God's grace. They seek His glory, not their own. Their ideal is to help relieve suffering for love alone, without thinking of any reward or advantage for themselves.

They draw nearer to Christ, serving Him in the poor and one another. They grow more perfect in love by expressing compassionate and tender love to the poor and one another.

Therefore, their journey together towards holiness is primarily made through:

- Visiting and dedicating themselves to the poor, whose faith and courage often teach Vincentians how to live. Vincentians assume the needs of the poor as their own.
- Attending the meeting of the Conference or Council, where shared fraternal spirituality is a source of inspiration.
- Promoting a life of prayer and reflection, both at the individual and community level, sharing with their fellow members. Meditating on their Vincentian experiences offers them internal spiritual knowledge of themselves, others and the goodness of God.



- Transforming their concern into action and their compassion into practical and effective love

Their journey together towards holiness will be all the more fruitful if the members' personal lives are characterised by prayer, meditation on the Holy Scriptures and other inspirational texts and devotion to the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary, whose protection we have always sought, and to the teachings of the Church.

*Commentary.* -"journey together". This is, without doubt, one of the most fundamental articles in the Rule. It has to be read very slowly, meditated upon deep in our heart and shared with our fellow members. We are not walking alone. We are not called to be saved alone. Each member walks next to his brothers and sisters towards perfection. He is responsible for his own actions and, when appropriate, for the example and help he gives to his brothers and sisters. Nothing good is achieved outside the Conference, if the members do not love one another. No service to the poor is guaranteed if we, the members, are not aware of the service we owe to each other. The ignition of our love in the Conference is the fuel that will allow us, later, to devote ourselves to those who suffer. No one can give what he does not have.

*"true holiness is perfect union with Christ and the perfection of love"*

*This definition of holiness comes from Vatican II. "We will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, holiness," (LG 50) which is "expressed by those who .. strive for the perfection of charity" (LG39). The call to become someone who radiates perfect love is nothing less than a call to sanctity. 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification' (1Th 4:3; Eph 1:4) Vincentians are called to become saints!*

### **2.3 Prayer in Union with Christ**

In every Conference throughout the world and in their personal lives, Vincentians raise their prayers to God, united with the prayer of Christ, on behalf of one another and their masters the poor, whose suffering they wish to share.

*Commentary.* -Alone, we cannot achieve anything of eternal value. The members' prayer, individual and communal, ensures our union with Christ and enables us to spread His Love. In this prayer, we should feel linked to the Holy Church's prayer and listen to what those who suffer have to teach us. They are undoubtedly our masters, who can teach us best the way of self-denial and of generous devotion. St. Vincent said, "Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything." He proclaims that prayer is a "fountain of youth" which invigorates us.

### **2.4 The Spirituality of Blessed Frederic Ozanam**

The spirituality of one of its founders inspires Vincentians profoundly. The Blessed Frederic Ozanam:

- Sought to renew faith, among all people, in Christ and in the civilising effect of the teachings of the Church through all time.
- Envisioned the establishment of a network of charity and social justice encircling the world.



- Attained holiness as a layman through living the Gospel fully in all aspects of his life.
- Had a passion for truth, democracy and education.

*Commentary.-The Conferences should take advantage of the teachings of one of our founders, maybe the most important one for Vincentian spirituality, and whose life of perfection has been acknowledged by the Holy Church. A layman, a family man, model husband, professional man and friend. We should not miss the enlightenment that our Lord gave us with the presence of Frederic Ozanam.*

*"Sought to renew faith ...in Christ"*

*Ozanam's words and example brought others to Christ. Vincentians are called to proclaim the Good News in word and deed (see Commentary to 1.11).*

*"a network of charity encircling the world"*

*Members share in this aspiration of Ozanam by contributing to Council General. One of its main functions is to help the Society in all nations to start new Conferences and Councils, providing financial help, volunteers and always, prayer (see Rule 4.1.2).*

## **2.5 The Spirituality of St. Vincent**

Having been placed under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul by the founding members, members of the Society are inspired by his spirituality, manifest in his attitudes, his thoughts, his example and his words.

For Vincentians, the key aspects of St. Vincent's spirituality are:

- To love God, our Father, with the sweat of our brow and the strength of our arms;
- To see Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ;
- To share the compassionate and liberating love of Christ the Evangeliser and Servant of the poor;
- To heed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

*Commentar.-The founders chose St. Vincent de Paul as patron saint and life model: the great saint of Charity. How could we forget him? How could we not know his works in depth and try to follow in his footsteps? Vincent's holy audacity and creativity should be a permanent example for Vincentians when facing the difficulties that are sometimes entailed in helping people in need. Let us be imaginative in assisting them. Let us dream of new solutions that allow us to help them rise above their current condition. Let us dream as Vincent did, when he set up the Daughters of Charity, and sent them worldwide, without being bound to a convent. They were obliged only to serve the poor, in whom they could find Christ.*

*"To heed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit"*

*Through this text and those about charisms (1.1, 3.11) and prayer (1.7, 3.9). the Rule is calling on the Society to become more and more open to the spiritual light and energy of the Holy Spirit. We will not experience the 'more abundant life' Jesus came to give (cf. Jn 10:10), unless we are open to the 'release of the Holy Spirit', an expression of the Holy Spirit which will frequently become manifest in modest gifts not normally considered to be extraordinary graces. Nevertheless, this intervention and these modest and simple gifts will greatly enhance our service of the poor.*



### 2.5.1 Essential virtues

Vincentians seek to emulate St. Vincent in the five virtues essential for promoting love and respect for the poor:

- Simplicity – frankness, integrity, genuineness.
- Humility – accepting the truth about our frailties, gifts talents and charisms, yet knowing that all that God gives us is for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.
- Gentleness – friendly assurance and invincible goodwill, which mean kindness, tenderness and patience in our relationship with others.
- Selflessness – dying to our ego with a life of self-sacrifice; members share their time, their possessions, their talents and themselves in a spirit of generosity.
- Zeal – a passion for the full flourishing and eternal happiness of every person.

*Commentary.-Read these words slowly. These virtues reveal the essence of what a Vincentian should be and how we should work. Is this difficult? Everything is possible with Love, in the encounter with God. "...studying St. Vincent de Paul's most intimate actions and discovering the secrets of his thought, they know that, if he deserves the glorious title of Father of the poor, it is because he learned how to love them through loving our Lord Jesus Christ. If he provided them with bodily care, likely to elevate the deprived instead of humiliating them, it is because he honoured them as images and brothers of his Divine Master ... he considered himself as a gentle instrument of the Divine Providence, which he wanted to obey, but never to run ahead of, because he preferred that the good be done by others rather than by himself. He only appeared when the other workers left the field. After having worked hard with his arms and the sweat of his brow, his deep humility made him consider that he did nothing and that he was a useless servant." (Introduction to the S.S.V.P. Manual 1845)*

### 2.6 A vocation for every moment of our lives

The Vincentian vocation affects all aspects of members' daily lives, making them more sensitive and caring in their family, work and leisure activities. Vincentians are available for work in the Conferences only after fulfilling their family and professional duties.

*Commentary.-We follow Christ as Vincentians, at every moment and in every situation of our life. Our belonging to a Conference should not be a separate department of our lives. On the contrary: our experience in the Conference and in the contact with the suffering, our prayer, individual and communal, should pervade all our life. Not only for a short time or one day a week: our whole life: as parents, as sons and daughters, as working people and professionals, as friends. We should strive to ensure that everything is presided over by the love we have for Christ.*

*"making them more sensitive and caring"*

*Vincentians should become known more and more as people who listen. This is how they will be viewed by their next-door neighbours, their colleagues at work and by anyone with whom they come into contact. Listening is another name for love.*



### **3. MEMBERS, CONFERENCES, COUNCILS – COMMUNITIES OF FAITH & LOVE**

#### **3.1 Membership**

The Society is open to all those who seek to live their faith loving and committing themselves to their neighbour in need. (See Article 6.4 of the Rule).

*Commentary.-Open to everyone. We do not seek to be closed and isolated groups. On the contrary: only if we grow is there evidence that we are really giving witness and a witness that inspires love. Failure to attract new members should always be observed as an indication that something is wrong within the Conference. It could be a symptom that we are asleep; that we are no longer in touch with the needs that the society we serve regards as fundamental."...let us always move ahead and keep developing our modest Works; let us hope that every year a new idea springs up in us, a new improvement and let us, thereby, avoid the apathy which is easily contented with what has already been done" (Introduction to the S.S.V.P. Manual 1845)*

#### **3.2 Equality**

The Society, in each of its Conferences (the primary basic unit of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul), makes no distinction regarding gender, wealth, occupation, social status or ethnic origin.

*Commentary.-Does our Lord make distinctions? We do not aim at making them either. The "Gentile and the Jew" are the same. Men and women, the learned and the illiterate, the white and the black, everybody is the same in the Conferences, so far as they seek to serve God by devoting themselves to the poor in the community of the Conference. "... for all those who wish to do good, it is pleasant and charming to see men from all social levels, positions, views and ages, united by the sacred bond of faith, learning the lessons of charity..." (Introduction to the Manual, 1845)*

#### **3.3 Meetings of the Vincentian members**

The members meet as brothers and sisters with Christ in the midst of them, in Conferences that are genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action. Spiritual bonds and friendship between members are essential, as is the common mission to help the poor and marginalized. The entire Society is a true and unique worldwide Community of Vincentian friends.

*Commentary.-"a worldwide community of friends"*  
*It is recommended here that we re-read the commentary to 2.2. Very little is possible without the fellow members' love for one another. First, in their own Conference, later feeling they are members of a single immense Conference that includes all the members worldwide. "The meeting day was a celebration, because it was a reunion of those who had lived apart during the week." (Introduction to the Manual 1845) "Following faithfully the advice of our Divine Master and of his beloved apostle John, we will love each other. We will love one another now and for ever, far and near, from one Conference to another, from town to town, from*



*nation to nation. This deep friendship will enable us to bear with each other's failings." (Rule, 1835, PC)*

*Members who do not live up to their vocation*

*"We will never believe an evil report of a brother but with great sorrow, and when we cannot reject the evidence of facts. Then, in order to conform ourselves to the will of Him who has confided to each one the care of his neighbour, in a spirit of charity, and with all the kindness and warmth of sincere friendship, we will ourselves counsel our failing, or fallen, brother or cause advice to be conveyed to him; we will help him to become stronger in good or to get up from his fall." (Rule, 1835, PC)*

*"with Christ in the midst of them" Christ is in the midst when we are gathered "in his name," i.e. sharing the mind and heart of Christ, when love is present and the Conference is open to all the gifts of the Holy Spirit (see 2.5). Ozanam experienced all this in the first Conference and wrote: "God who draws the clouds together to scatter the lightning, also draws souls together to radiate love", implying an immense amplification of love, far beyond that which could be achieved by all the members as separate individuals.*

### 3.3.1 Frequency of the meetings

The Conferences meet regularly and consistently, usually weekly, but at least every fortnight.

*Commentary.* -Friends wish to see each other frequently; the poor need us urgently. This article says that we should meet at least once a fortnight. But we strongly recommend that, whenever possible, a week would be the longest gap before meeting to talk about all the issues - concerning the poor, and concerning God. "Isolated virtues wither easily; together and intertwined they form immortal wreaths" (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, letter from Lyon to the Conferences of Paris, 1838).

### 3.4 Fraternity and simplicity

Meetings are held in a spirit of fraternity, simplicity and Christian joy.

*Re-read the commentaries on 2.5 and to 2.5.1 How can it be otherwise? Everything has been given to us. Nothing belongs to us: simplicity is required. "Our mutual kindness should be warm and without limits" (Rule, 1835, PR). "To have friends means to live twice" (F,Lallier, circular letter 1/3/1837)*

### 3.5 Preserving the spirit

Members of all ages strive to preserve the spirit of youth, which is characterised by enthusiasm, adaptability and creative imagination. They are willing to make sacrifices and take risks for the benefit of the poor wherever they may be: by sharing their discomfort, needs, and sorrows and defending their rights.

*Commentary.* -We have already written concerning 2.5, about the need to dream. Youth is the period with a capacity for "daydreaming". Let us all be young and never lose the capacity to be surprised, by trying to discover new ways in the service required by the poor: seriously! Suffering is not something that we can accept without trying to eradicate it: always with charity, but without forgetting clarity.



*People only become old when they lose the ability to teach or to learn. Let us not become old in the service of the poor (see also 1.9, 2.2, and 2.3).*

### **3.6 Councils**

Conferences are grouped under various levels of Councils.

Councils exist to serve all the Conferences they coordinate. They help the Conferences to develop their spiritual life, to intensify their service and to diversify their activities so that they may always be responsive to the needs of those who suffer.

Councils at appropriate levels are particularly called to: create new Conferences, to help existing Conferences to expand, to promote Special Works, to prepare training courses and encourage Vincentians to attend them, to foster interest in cooperation with the Vincentian Family, to promote cooperation with other organisations and Institutions, to develop friendship between members in the same area, to provide communication to and from Conferences and higher Councils. In summary, to promote the sense of belonging to a Society which encircles the world.

*Commentary.-Councils have an enormous importance in intensifying the Conferences' life and development. This article should be read carefully. Councils exist in order to serve, and the required service is perfectly explicit in the article. Let the Councils be diligent in their task and let the Conferences value the Councils' effort to serve; "...if there is a Council at their service, this is because the highest trust prevails among us and no one wants to rule over the rest. One heart and one soul: cor unum et anima una" (Introduction to the S.S.V.P. Manual 1845).*

### **3.7 Young members**

Young members keep the Society young. They see with new eyes and often look far ahead. The Society works constantly to form Youth Conferences and welcomes young members into all Conferences. Their experience in a community of faith and love and their exposure to poverty deepen their spirituality, spur them to action and help them to grow as human beings. The senior members assume the responsibility of assisting them along their path of training, respecting their personal choices and their aspirations of Vincentian service.

*Commentary.-What a great mission for the senior members: to serve the youngest ones! It is not about leading them. It is not about commanding them. It is about serving them, being useful to them on the road they are beginning to travel – their own life - and which should be discovered by them with the support, example and humility of the senior members: just as it was when we were founded. Bailly, the first President General, was close to the young members, who dreamed of and desired the foundation of the Conferences. It was his example, his good work that convinced the students to join the first Conference. Let us do the same. Let us be at their disposal; making clear our opinion regarding their doubts and their aspirations but allowing them to find their own way.*



### **3.8 Aggregation and Institution of Conferences and Councils**

The visible unifying link within the Society is the Aggregation of the Conferences and the Institution of the Councils declared by the Council General.

*Commentary.-We are a "worldwide Christian community", says the first article in the Rule. Incorporation into the union of that universal fraternal community which is the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, is called Aggregation for the Conferences and Institution for the Councils.*

### **3.9 Subsidiarity and freedom of action**

The Society embraces the Principle of Subsidiarity as its basic standard of operation. Decisions are made as close as possible to the area of activity to ensure that the local environment and circumstances (cultural, social, political, etc.) are taken into consideration. In this way, the Society promotes local initiatives within its spirit. This freedom of action of Conferences and Councils, which has been kept faithfully since the origins of the Society, enables them to help the poor, spontaneously and more effectively, exempted from an excessive bureaucracy.

In exercising this freedom of action to face the challenge of poverty in their area, Vincentians feel called to pray together for guidance and strength and for that creative imagination which is the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, "Your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions" (Joel 3,1).

*Commentary.-A certain authority and certain functioning rules are, undoubtedly, necessary for a worldwide organisation. But even more important, the principle of Subsidiarity has been enjoyed by the Conferences from their beginning. Where are the needs of the suffering best known? In the local area. Therefore, all Conferences have total freedom to serve the deprived as they think best, within the spirit of the Rule. But this does not mean that Conferences and Councils are autonomous in all ways. Conferences and Councils have an obligation to comply with civil law, to adhere to the Rule and Statutes of the Society, and to the policies and strategies of the National Council. It is also essential for the good name and transparency of the Society that National Councils require adherence to good but simple accounting and auditing practices, including, if appropriate, central banking and consolidated accounts for the entire Society.*

### **3.10 Democracy**

All decisions are made by consensus after the necessary prayer, reflection and consultation. The democratic spirit is fundamental at all levels of the Society and, when appropriate, matters are put to a vote.

*Commentary.-"consultation». Is anybody cleverer or holier than the other members? We cannot be sure through whom the Holy Spirit will speak. Are we sure that we, like God, can see deep into the heart of each person? Obviously not. Let us consult, let us comment, with charity and clarity, about all the issues. Light will frequently arise from the one of whom we expect the least. The Lord will enlighten whoever He wishes. A dominating leader will de-motivate some people, be a source of conflict and ultimately will harm the Society.*



"consensus". Let us take our decisions after listening to each other. 'Consensus' implies general approval with no one feeling strongly enough to continue advocating an alternative view.

### **3.11 Presidents as servant leaders**

Following Christ's example, the Presidents at all levels of the Society endeavour to be servant leaders. They provide an encouraging atmosphere in which the talents, capacities and spiritual charisms of the members are identified, developed and put to the service of the poor and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The President of the Conference or Council will have special responsibility for promoting Vincentian spirituality.

*Commentary.-What is the Mission of the Presidents? To serve. It is as simple as that. As the President is, so is the Conference. Our tradition says that usually Conferences are what their Presidents are. This is not because they preside over them, nor because of what they demand, nor because of what they know. It is because of what they are able to elicit from each one of the members by listening to them, encouraging them and by accompanying them, by being concerned about them, all to achieve better service of the poor. Presidents are the key figure in the Conferences but usually this will not be obvious because of their humility. "(The President) is marked out to be the servant of the rest, to lead and direct Christian societies. He combines in himself the necessary knowledge and a sincere practice of his religion with a great spirit of prudence and conciliation. prudens est, regat nos" (E. Bailly, 1 President General, Circular Letter 1/3/1844). A servant leader will ideally have that deep faith which is a silent influence for good.*

### **3.12 Formation of members**

It is essential that the Society continually promote the formation and training of its members and Officers, in order to deepen their knowledge of the Society and their spirituality, improve the sensitivity, quality and efficiency of their service to the poor and help them be aware of the benefits, resources and opportunities that are available for the poor. The Society also offers members higher training in order to better help to raise the cultural and social level of those who request this support.

*Commentary.-On-going training is a requirement in the life of each Conference. Continuous social changes, new legislation, new resources that become available, demand from each Vincentian the effort to keep up and constantly to enhance his formation. It is not possible to dispense with this almost daily "updating", that enables us better to serve those who suffer. "Is it not true that we must study steadily, if we want to carry out our works successfully?" (Introduction to the Manual, 1845)*  
*"essential" is a strong word which implies that every National Council should develop a programme of formation and training, either alone or with the support of the rest of the Society.*

### **3.13 The spirit of poverty and encouragement**

Members of the Society are united in the same spirit of poverty and of sharing. They encourage one another to live a profound spiritual life and spirit of prayer. For this purpose, the role of a Spiritual Adviser is very important.



*Commentary.-Each Conference, whenever possible, aspires to enrich itself with the presence of a priest who encourages the members towards a life more and more perfect and devoted. But neither does a Conference forget the ultimate responsibility of the laity in the Conferences. This does not diminish the importance of the priest's contribution among us. On the contrary, we owe him the highest respect and consideration, and give his views special weight in matters of faith or morals. But this should never be the excuse for us to neglect or to leave in his hands the most serious decisions affecting our Vincentian work. The responsibility we acquire in Baptism demands from us our own commitment in matters regarding the poor entrusted to our care.*

### **3.14 The use of money and property for the poor**

Vincentians should never forget that giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money.

Nevertheless, the Society uses money and property to help relieve the suffering of those in need. The Society's funds must be handled with the utmost care, prudence and generosity. Money must not be hoarded. Decisions regarding the use of money and property are to be made after reflection in the light of the Gospel and Vincentian principles. Accurate records must be kept of all money received or spent. The Society may not allot funds to other organisations, except occasionally for other branches of the Vincentian Family, save under exceptional circumstances.

*Commentary.-An old member used to call money, even though it was necessary, "the devil's dung". It should be used properly, of course, not in any way hoarded. We should firmly believe that God will provide everything we need, and instead of hoarding it in excess, the Conference should put it at the disposal of other Conferences having needs but inadequate resources. Sometimes, there can be situations of real scandal, due to the lack of a commitment to share. This is an issue about which each Conference should think seriously.*

### **3.15 Communication**

The vitality of the Society's network of charity depends on the regular and rapid exchange of news and information. Such communication broadens the members' horizon and enhances the interest of members in the experiences and challenges of their brothers and sisters throughout the world. The Vincentian response to communication is a willingness to learn and a desire to help.

*Commentary.-Without communication, we simply do not exist as an interdependent Society. It is one of the most frequent omissions committed by the Conferences. How can we not tell others of the things we do which we find makes it easier to serve and to tackle a specific poverty? How can we not pay attention to those things discovered by others? How can we properly serve the poor without exchanging experiences among us? Without telling what we do, is it possible to improve and to attract resources to assist the poor? Any country or Council publishing any kind of Magazine about the Society, should send it to other Vincentian nations and to the General Council itself, in order to contribute to this effort of communication.*



## **4. RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE VINCENTIAN & CATHOLIC NETWORK OF CHARITY**

### **4.1 Twinning**

Conferences and Councils help others in need, both at the national and international level. This is one of the activities most cherished by the Society. The awareness of acute poverty in a great number of countries and the Vincentian preferential option for the poor spurs Conferences and Councils to assist others with less resources or in particular situations.

This direct link between two Conferences or Councils, consisting of sharing prayer, a profound friendship and material resources, is called twinning. This activity contributes to world peace and to understanding and cultural exchange among peoples.

*Commentary.-Could a Christian, seeing another member of his community in the most absolute poverty, refuse to reach out to help? The negative answer, arising from faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ, compels us to be very attentive in providing help to the Conferences who need it. The amount sent every year by Vincentians to other poorer Vincentians in order to help them in their task, is huge. It cannot be otherwise, if we really understand the challenge of a globalised poverty, for the alleviation of which we are all responsible. The Conferences do not limit themselves to the care of poverty nearby. On the contrary, those Conferences which really feel the true nature of their mission, are always ready to send the necessary assistance so that members in other parts of the world with smaller economic resources, will be able to help the most deprived to release themselves from poverty. This is, perhaps, one of the most beautiful tokens of selfless love; to help the poor whom we only see with the eyes of faith through the work of other members in remote places of the world.*

#### **4.1.1 Prayer as the basis of friendship**

Twinning promotes spirituality, deep friendship, solidarity and mutual help. Funds and other material resources can be provided to enable a Conference or Council to help local families. Financial, technical, medical and educational support is given to projects which are suggested by the Society locally and which encourage self-sufficiency. Even more important is support given through prayer, as well as through mutual communication regarding what has been accomplished and what is happening among Vincentians in each area, including news about persons and families.

*Commentary.-If any kind of economic help is necessary, so is spiritual help through prayer. None of us is so poor that we cannot help someone else, and this applies even more to prayer, to offering small personal sacrifices, to help fellow members with whom we are not acquainted. We do not know them, but we feel linked to them by the universal work of bringing God's Love to all people.*

#### **4.1.2 Vincentians' personal commitment**



The Society urges the Vincentians to consider undertaking a personal commitment for a particular period of time to work with Vincentians in other countries or to spread Conferences.

*Commentary.-Some Vincentians, when they find the time and the capacity, volunteer to bring their experience and knowledge to other places in the world. They are called "Vincentians for Peace". These groups of the Society's members, of different ages, commit themselves for a specific period of time, either to help the Conferences in general, or to work on specific projects helping to develop certain skills in other countries. This is a sort of Twinning where the donation generously offered is personal experience and devotion.*

#### **4.2 Emergency assistance**

When disasters, war or major accidents occur, the Society launches emergency initiatives on the spot and provides funds for the local Society to help victims.

*Commentary.-The Society, through the Council General, always has bank accounts containing Emergency Aid Funds. For Conferences and Councils worldwide there is always a special responsibility to contribute to these accounts so that, faced with unforeseen situations of distress, the Council General, on behalf of the whole Society, can send the necessary assistance to the Conferences or Councils needing it. The action of Conferences in such emergency situations will always be to help the poor when larger organisations are not able to meet their individual needs.*

#### **4.3 The Vincentian Family**

Members throughout the world, together with other communities inspired by the spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul and with those whom they help, form a single family. Gratefully remembering the support and encouragement the first Conference received from Blessed Rosalie Rendu, the Society maintains and develops close relationships with other branches of the Vincentian family, while preserving its identity. It cooperates with them in spiritual development and common projects, as well as with the Church's charitable pastoral initiatives at every level, whenever this may be mutually enriching and useful to those who suffer.

*Commentary.-True to the wishes of the founders, the Conferences do not forget the inspiration of Vincent de Paul (Rule 2.5; 2.5.1). That inspiration leads us to share our efforts and challenges with the ecclesiastical institutions which share the spirituality of the Saint of Charity. With them, (The Daughters of Charity, Congregation of the Mission, Religious of Saint Vincent, International Association of Charity, Vincentian Marian Youth and Misevi -Vincentian lay missionaries -, among others), we strive to serve the poor better by a coordination between consecrated and lay persons, which is always so necessary in the life of Holy Church.*

*Conferences do not forget the one who undoubtedly can be called our first Spiritual Adviser: the Blessed Rosalie Rendu, who knew how to stand by our young founders in the beginning, with her advice and her example, afterwards letting them walk on their own, in response to their lay vocation. She always remained at their disposal for everything they could need from her. She was an example of a mother who dreamed of*



*the formal and responsible independence of those children who sought her help in the first moments of their journey.*

## **5. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHURCH HIERARCHY**

### **5.1 A close relationship**

Faithful to the clear intentions of Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his companions, the Society has a close relationship with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Respect of the members for the hierarchy provides the foundation for harmonious reciprocal cooperation.

*Commentary.-Being part of a lay Society which takes seriously its responsibilities within the Church, the Conferences strive to maintain an absolute respect and love towards the Holy Church's hierarchy. The Society strives to scrupulously respect the Hierarchy's voice in everything that concerns it, whether from the Parish, the Diocese or the Holy See. The process is reciprocal. Canon law says, "(The laity) have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their views on matters which concern the good of the Church" (Canon 212 .3). The Society also bears in mind that "associations and movements need to work in full harmony within both the universal Church" (NMI 46) and the dioceses.*

### **5.2 Autonomy**

The Society is legally autonomous as to its existence, constitution, organisation, rules, activities and internal government. Members freely choose their own officers and manage the Society's activities and assets with full autonomy, in accordance with their own Statutes and the legislation in effect in each country.

*Commentary.-The Society, usually a civil institution, legally constituted in most of the countries, is free in all its actions and does not need the formal authorization of any entity to develop its activities. The Society's autonomy has been recognised on many occasions by the Holy See, in particular in the decision dated 13th November 1920.*

### **5.3 Moral recognition**

The Society recognizes the right and duty of the diocesan bishop to confirm that none of its activities is contrary to Catholic faith or morals. The Society, whenever possible, informs the diocesan bishops of its activities annually, as a sign of ecclesial communion.

*Commentary.-The Conferences, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, whose members wish to be faithful children of the Holy Church, acknowledge that it is each Diocese's Bishop with whom it should cooperate in the Diocesan Pastoral social welfare initiatives that the Bishop considers appropriate and which foster person-to-person contact with the poor. In particular, it recognizes the Bishop's competence to confirm that the Society's activities in his Diocese are in keeping with Catholic faith and morals. "Let us never do anything new without having received the blessing of the Hierarchy at its different levels. Neither will we ever undertake any new and important work within an ecclesiastical jurisdiction, without consulting him who is at the head of it. We will do nothing in opposition to spiritual authority" (Rule 1835, PC)*



## **6. ECUMENICAL & INTER-FAITH RELATIONSHIPS**

### **6.1 Every member should foster ecumenism**

Each Vincentian should seek to deepen a personal commitment to ecumenism and to cooperation in works of charity and justice as a contribution towards the achievement of that full and visible unity of the Church for which Christ prayed, **'that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they be one in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me'** (Jn 17:21).

*Commentary.-The Society, each Conference, even each Vincentian, does not forget the requirements of ecumenism as stated by the Holy Church. It is not possible to make this commitment as a duty, following a 'rule'. "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. For it is from newness of attitudes (cf. Eph 4:23), from self-denial and un-stinted love, that yearnings for unity take their rise and grow toward maturity (UR 7). It is prayer to the Holy Spirit which will open us to this change of heart (cf. CCC1108).*

*"that the world may believe"*

*"Division openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world, and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the Good News to every creature" (UUS 6). "Those belong to (the ecumenical movement) who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour, doing this not merely as individuals but also as corporate bodies." (UR1)*

### **6.2 The Society is committed to ecumenical and inter-faith cooperation**

Following the teachings of the Catholic Church, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul recognizes, accepts and encourages the call to ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue and cooperation which arise from its charitable activity. It is prepared to participate in the Church's ecumenical and inter-faith initiatives within each country, in harmony with the diocesan bishop.

*Commentary.-Being aware of this ecclesiastical requirement, the Society, everywhere in the world, abides by the guidelines of each Diocese. Each Conference understands that the Catholic response in each area should be characterised by harmony and, therefore, prior to any action in this delicate field, it listens to and acts in keeping with the indications of the local bishop.*

*If this cooperation with people of other denominations is to be a witness to an unbelieving society, it is important that the public should observe an easy friendship and trust, and a oneness that is a reflection of the oneness of love, knowledge, will and mission at the heart of the Trinity.*

### **6.3 The adoption of practical initiatives**

Conferences and Councils should establish a dialogue with their counterparts in other Christian churches or ecclesial communities and other faiths, with regard to cooperation in charitable work, wherever this is appropriate.

*Commentary.-There are various circumstances in which the Conferences can be established in so many places around the world. The principle of Subsidiarity (refer to*



Rule 3.9), allows the different Conferences and Councils to decide locally with whom to cooperate in their service of the poor. Prudence will indicate on each occasion what advice to seek before commencing this cooperation, which must always be in keeping with the spirit of the Society (Rule 6.7).

#### **6.4 Ecumenical and inter-faith membership**

In some countries, circumstances may make it desirable to accept as members Christians of other confessions or people of other faiths who sincerely respect and accept the Society's identity and its principles insofar as differences of faith allow. The Episcopal Conference should be consulted.

*Commentary.-The world is big and many people feel the call to help the poor. The Conferences must be open to admit them. Having said that, the Society cannot forget that, in addition to trying to help people in need, those who suffer, each Conference is part of a worldwide Catholic community. The members who feel called to admit people of other beliefs must ensure they understand that whilst we will always have the utmost respect for the faith and conscience of such members, we will always preserve those prayers and other spiritual practices which are fundamental to the Catholic ethos of the Society. To protect ourselves from any possible danger to our ethos, the Rule underlines the need to consult the local Episcopal Conference. Let us submit to its criteria; that will always be good for the peace of our souls. (See also 3.1)*

#### **6.5 Preserving the Catholic credo and ethos**

The Catholic beliefs and ethos of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul must be preserved. The President, Vice-President and Spiritual Adviser should, therefore, be Roman Catholic. They may, in certain situations depending on national circumstances, and after consultation with the local diocesan Bishop, be members of churches and ecclesial communities which share the Catholic belief in, among other issues, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the seven Sacraments and devotion to Mary.

*Commentary.-In addition to the Spiritual Adviser, the President has an obligation to promote Vincentian spirituality and the Catholic ethos (see 3.11). This also applies to the Vice-President who, when necessary, fulfils all the duties of the President. Such an obligation should not be imposed on someone who cannot in conscience discharge it. The intention of the Society's 1999 General Assembly was to allow at least Catholic, Orthodox and High Anglican members to hold these offices. The Catholic hierarchy within each country will know whether there are other churches or ecclesial communities which meet these criteria. As other officers do not have a specific obligation to promote Vincentian spirituality, these offices, Secretary, Treasurer etc, are open to any member.*

#### **6.6 Affiliated groups can work very closely with us**

The Society accepts the principle of affiliated groups. These groups consist mainly of members of other Christian churches and ecclesial communities who are attracted by the work of the Society and/or its spirituality. They are welcome to participate in the charitable work, appropriate Council discussions and the



fraternal life of the Society, but are not eligible for office in the Society. Groups from non-Christian religions may also be similarly affiliated.

*Commentary.-In some places, it can be appropriate to accept with an affiliated status, and with the limitations stated by the article, groups from other creeds or beliefs. The Society can admit them, but in its desire to remain Catholic, rules out their eligibility for representative offices.*

### **6.7 Relationships with state agencies & other charities**

When the problems they encounter are beyond their competence or capacity, Vincentians may contact State Agencies and other more specialised charitable organisations, provided that such action helps the Society in its struggle against injustice and respects the spirit of the Society.

*Commentary.-A more and more globalised world is also a more complicated world. The Conferences, through the appropriate Councils, can and should seek a ready collaboration with other organisations, agencies or institutions that could assist their work, with benefit to the most deprived.*

*A prudent, observant attitude, will keep us away from the scandal that could be implied by collaboration with groups or people having approaches opposite to the Holy Church' moral teaching. "...it is necessary to avoid even the appearance of evil and everything that could cause scandal to the weak" (Rule 1835, PC)*

## **7. RELATIONSHIP WITH CIVIL SOCIETY – WORK FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

### **7.1 The Society gives immediate help but also seeks mid-term and long-term solutions**

The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it. It is, therefore, committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination. In all its charitable actions there should be a search for justice; in its struggle for justice, the Society must keep in mind the demands of charity.

*Commentary.-The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and each of its Conferences, seeks the spiritual and material prosperity of each of the persons it helps. It seeks to prevent the extension of poverty in its various manifestations. It seeks to alleviate suffering. For this purpose, it uses as many means as possible to re-establish justice, always with Charity towards all men. "Peace is also the fruit of love, for love goes beyond what justice can achieve" (GS 78).*

### **7.2 A vision of the civilization of love**

Affirming the dignity of each human being as created in God's image, and Jesus' particular identification with those who are excluded by society, Vincentians envision a more just society in which the rights, responsibilities and development of all people are promoted.



As citizens of one world, Vincentians listen to the voice of the Church which demands their participation in creating a more equitable and compassionate social order, promoting the culture of life and the civilization of love. In this way, the Society shares the Church's mission to evangelise the world through visible witness, in both actions and words.

*Commentary.-It is not possible for Vincentians to remain solely interested in the effects of deprivation on individuals. We have to seek to remedy the causes as far as our modest possibilities allow. To evangelize, the inalienable mission of each Conference and each member means to proclaim the Good News and this includes the promotion of a civilisation of love. It is not possible to tell men that God loves them, without them seeing our determination to change the structures of society so they are founded on Love.*

*"As citizens of one world». Of course, Vincentians are loyal citizens of their country but their concern for the common good embraces the world and we have a loyalty to the poor everywhere.*

*"culture of life": Vincentians are committed to promote the right to life from conception to the natural end of earthly life.*

### **7.3 Vision of the future**

The Society's vision goes beyond the immediate future, looking towards sustainable development and protection of the environment for the benefit of future generations.

*Commentary.-The Society's Twinning projects foster "sustainable development." protection of the environment". It is essential to respect the environment, as a consequence of our faith in its creation by God for the benefit of human beings, who are the stewards of creation and must care for it and nurture it for future generations. The environmental crisis "is truly trans-national and intergenerational, the first of such kind ever to face humanity as a whole" (To the UN 11/91).*

### **7.4 The practical Vincentian approach to social justice**

The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice.

*Commentary.-There are no two ways about it. Our outlook is that of the poor, of the oppressed, of the persecuted, of the hungry, the exploited... Others may defend other views and other options. Ours is the viewpoint of the poor.*

### **7.5 A voice for the voiceless**

The Society helps the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves. When they cannot, the Society must speak on behalf of those who are ignored.

*Commentary.-Let us help them to tell their truth, to reveal their suffering, to explain their needs. Let them feel responsible for achieving their goals. When this is not really possible, only then, let us become the voice of the voiceless ones. Only then.*

### **7.6 Facing the structures of sin**



Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements.

*Commentary.-"speak out clearly .. with charity". We cannot pretend that the structures of sin do not exist. They do exist. We should point them out, even with our modest resources, but with the full conviction and vigour that derives from a life shared with the poor. Charity towards everybody will help us to achieve this with the least possible offence to those responsible. To challenge what is wrong in society was seen by Ozanam as essential; "What evil is done in the world through the inconsistency and timidity of good people." But, he reminded us, "kindness will be the character of Christian controversy." "Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society" (GS 27). "There exist also sinful inequalities that affect millions of people" (CCC1938)*

### **7.7 Striving to change attitudes**

Vincentians oppose discrimination of all kinds and work to change the attitudes of those who view the weak or those who are different with prejudice, fear or scorn, attitudes which gravely wound the dignity of others.

The Society strives, with charity, to foster new attitudes of respect and empathy for the weak, so that all are able to understand, recognise and defend the right of each person to be responsible for his or her own life. The Society promotes understanding, cooperation and mutual love among people of different cultures, religions, ethnic origins and social groups, and so contributes to the peace and unity of all peoples.

*Commentary.-The poor are our friends: regardless of their colour, of their medical condition, of their poverty, of their weakness, of their defects. Let us introduce them to the world as Children of God: as our brothers, as beloved friends.*

*"opposes discrimination .. promotes understanding"*

*To be misunderstood and discriminated against is a severe form of poverty because it humiliates, reduces self-esteem and reduces opportunities for work. Let us encourage sympathy and tolerance.*

### **7.8 Political independence of the Society**

The Society does not identify with any political party and always adopts a non-violent approach.

It is good that some members follow and fully participate in their political vocation in such a way that they bring Christian values to political matters. Those members who hold political offices will be asked, always with charity, not to hold any mission of representation in the Society during their term of political office.



*Commentary.-From its foundation, the Society has taken extreme care not to identify itself with any political party or political option. It even advised that there should be a total absence of party-political conversations within each Conference. Of course, the Society understands and praises the members who wish to take the Christian message into active politics. But these dear members, in order to avoid misunderstandings of any kind, are begged to relinquish any representative service in the Society while they are in a period of direct political activity. This is a small sacrifice that will undoubtedly be welcome and understood by all of them. "The spirit of charity, together with Christian prudence, shall further induce us to banish party-political discussions for ever from both general meetings and ordinary meetings. (Rule 1835, PC)*

### **7.9 Working with communities**

The Society should work not only with individuals in need but also with families and communities. It can help an excluded or deprived local community to develop a sense of responsibility and solidarity which leads it to improve its economic, social or environmental well-being, always retaining the personal contact of members with those who suffer.

*Commentary.-It frequently becomes necessary to go beyond simple personal help, as has been mentioned so often in this Rule and in its commentaries. We referred in 1.10 to the empowerment of individuals to help forge the destiny of their community. In this article, 7.9, it is envisaged that in a deprived community in which Vincentians already visit the poor, members may be able to help gather together people in the community who want to find ways to improve their lives. Vincentians could help them to discern their most pressing problems, to decide on the relative priorities and to develop a plan to raise public awareness and achieve change.*

*Any action of the Society, to be fully justified from a Vincentian point of view, always has to arise from personal contact with the individuals who suffer. It is far from our intention to become simply pressure groups. The Society and each Conference must first live close to those who suffer, and only then build on this experience by helping them to overcome difficulties.*