

Mission of the SSVP: **“A network of friends who seek personal holiness through service to those in need and in defense of social justice.”**

For my brothers and sisters who are interested in contemporary history, I understand that the world of today is a mixture of the 1930s (the era of the economic crisis and a consequent increase of poverty), and the 1960s (the era of a deep crisis of faith, of disbelief in institutions and a relativism in relation to Christian values and human dignity). Added to this mix is a sad “digital polarization”, which divides regions, countries, institutions, communities, and families. As a result, the SSVP must be a voice of hope and peace!

Since 1969, Rev. Josef Ratzinger<sup>1</sup> (Pope Benedict XVI), has insisted on his vision of the struggles the Church must endure to become once again a “small community”, after a long “process of crystallization and clarification”. However, “when this trial is complete, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church”, through the return to her source and through the sweat of her saints. This Church will become an interiorized and simplified force, the hope and the “answer for which they have always been searching in secret”.

At the beginning of the 70s’, Father Ratzinger developed a project - which he called a “Reconquest” - to recover the truth of the Church’s doctrine, at its source, and thereby attract the faithful just as the apostles did when the “small Church” began. It was no coincidence that the inspired President General of the SSVP at the time, Pierre Chouard, launched the *Vincentian Youth Movement* to rejuvenate the “ageing” SSVP. We can see a parallel between Ratzinger’s concept of the “small Church” and the SSVP (as well as with the Vincentian Family as a whole). The recovery of our essence, our sources, should be accomplished through the “sweat of our saints”: those in the Conferences who pursue their daily divine work in serving the Poor. **It is therefore fundamental, in these challenging times, that the SSVP return to its sources, to the “initial spirit of the small Conference”!**

It is my conviction that a deep reflection on our mission statement, as described above, provides us with a clear answer to the world as it is, because it is based on our sources, on our essence, which have survived for almost two hundred years. In 2018 I had the honor of leading the work to define our mission statement, supported by an international survey within the Society, by historical research and by a productive discussion with the members of the International General Council (IGC).

On the other hand, we cannot forget that the SSVP is a mystic institution, with a global vocation, and adapted to local action. The IGC should take into account regional and local differences in economics, politics, culture, language, community organizations and Church ministry. We are an autonomous and “small” Church, but inserted within the universal Church, at the service of the Poor and of the sanctification of souls. For these reasons, I understand that no IGC action plan should be performed by one person alone, but instead by the international Vincentian community, with our mission in mind, so it can be a flame of hope for building a more just and fraternal world.

The IGC has a duty to **play an important role** in supporting overall human dignity, both of “our Lords and Masters”, and of SSVP members themselves. The IGC is more than the headquarters of the largest Catholic NGO in the world, it is more than just a Rule-keeper; it must foster good practices to serve both the Poor and Vincentians, it must be an environment where our members (particularly the youth) seek inspiration, where they look for examples of good conduct in a polarized, dehumanized and enslaving world.

I understand it is very unlikely that I will have the the honour of being elected to lead the IGC. However, the journey is more important than the destination. It is more likely that my mission within the electoral process is to propose certain ideas for a project of “Vincentian Reconquest”, that I trust will be considered in the years to come. These ideas are outlined in the text below, which does aim to be exhaustive. I have no complete answers to these challenges, but I have faith in our ability to find them as a global and multicultural community of missionary friends.

**“Project of Reconquest: touching hearts, in search of friendship, truth, service and justice”.**

- **Challenge #1 – in search of friendship: the importance of the IGC in building a true international community of solidarity.** Like the Church, the IGC (or any other Council or Conference) must not be limited to enforcing rules, but should be a living community<sup>2</sup> where life is abundant and based on friendship and solidarity.  
Special importance should be given to the following roles of the IGC: (1) fostering an effective twinning program with the transfer of spirituality and mutual learning (for those who send and receive the financial support); (2) developing effective cooperation projects with the Vincentian Family; and (3) implementing partnerships with institutions, which share our values and can complement our skills.
- **Challenge #2 – in search of truth: the importance of the IGC in supporting SSVP members, as individuals and as Conferences, on their way to holiness.** Just as the Church is a Eucharistic Community, bound by the Truth of the Body and the Blood of Christ, the SSVP is a community united in the shrine of the Body and Blood of Christ, and united in the holy house of the Poor (our Lord, according to Saint Vincent). According to Benedict XVI, we can’t practice faith and love unless we know and experience the Truth. For Vincentians, the Truth is what we learn from the scriptures, from the Church, from our sources and from the Poor (our Masters, according to Saint Vincent). For each Vincentian, this search for Truth leads us to proclaim and to live in accordance with this truth.  
The IGC leadership should, above all: (1) enhance the formation of mystic leaders, as followers of the theological and Vincentian virtues; (2) recover the *Movement of Vincentian Youth*, started in the 1960s; (3) examine the feasibility of forming full-time lay consecrated members of the Society; and (4) encourage the experience of the SSVP mission at the Conferences and Councils.
- **Challenge #3 – in search of service: the importance of the IGC in developing innovative methods for the SSVP’s direct service to the Poor,** by supporting their human dignity and by including them in the digital technology world.  
We are well able to identify the needs of the Poor, because we visit them and know them very well. The Poor should be at the center of SSVP decisions and actions. As a result, it is fundamental that all SSVP structures and processes (starting with the IGC), are adjusted and simplified to best serve both the Poor and Vincentians, servers of the Poor.  
Some important roles of the IGC include: (1) encouraging the exchange of best practices to serve the Poor; (2) an intensive use of digital communication, with and among the National Councils, with a cascade effect to the other Councils and Conferences; (3) supporting the National Councils, so that all of them have access to digital technology; (4) implementing a lean and horizontal structure, with greater participation from the National Councils, based, for example, on language grouping (the IGC money belongs to the Poor, so we must manage it in a frugal and transparent manner); (5) the simplification and reinforcement of the Rules more as an instrument for inspiring the mission than for punishment; and (6) the effective decentralization of decision-making from the IGC president.
- **Challenge #4 – in search of justice: the global importance of the IGC in defending Integral Human Development.** The IGC shall be a bridge to reduce polarization in today’s world and to foster peace. Specifically, the IGC should: (1) be the “voice of the Poor” at the Church and around the world in general; (2) support public-private policies to improve social services, according to the Social Doctrine of the Church; and (3) be proactive in discussions about an innovative and global “social contract”<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See “Glaube und Zukunft (“Faith and Future”), Josef Ratzinger, Kösel-Verlag Editors

<sup>2</sup> According to Pope Benedict XVI.

<sup>3</sup> The “social contract” is a global or local agreement for access to the public goods (education, health etc.). The SSVP could influence the development of an inclusive social contract, based on the Social Doctrine of the Church, initiated by the *Rerum Novarum* (1981), which was influenced by Ozanam. For example, the need to create an effective worldwide education fund should be included in this agenda.