History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul: From the First Conference to the creation of the Councils

Ralph Middlecamp
President National Council of the United States
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.

(Rule Part I 1.1)
The Society wishes to remember them all with gratitude, as they set an example of dedication to the poor and to the Church. (Rule Part I 1.1)
Founders were members of a society called the **Conference of History** which debated the social issues of the day. At a meeting they were challenged to show how they lived out their faith by their actions.
Their response to the challenge was one of action. “We must do what Our Lord Jesus Christ did when preaching the Gospel. Let us go to the poor.”
Do we include people in our discussions who challenge our beliefs and practices?

Have you had an experience where diverse points of view motivated change or growth?
The Holy Spirit was undoubtedly present in all of them at the founding of the Society, fostering the charism of each one. Among them, **Blessed Frederic Ozanam** was a radiant source of inspiration.

(Rule Part I 1.1)
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.

(Rule Part I 1.1)
History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul
A Collaborative Founding

On April 23, 1833 six students gathered in Emmanuel Bailly’s office of the La Tribune Catholique Newspaper to form a new organization a Conference of Charity
The question of meetings of the lay apostolate was one the Church of France approached with caution.
The government restricted religious activity but allowed groups to meet as long as they were less than twenty members.
In order to not worry the Church about these meetings of young lay people, Bailly asked the students to go and talk to the priest of the church of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, Father Olivier. He suggested that they teach catechism to the poor children of the parish.
This suggestion was not accepted so Bailly consults with other influential priests who provided assurance to proceed cautiously.
Bailly sent Devaux and Clavé to Blessed Sister Rosalie Rendu for guidance in ministering to the poor.
There was an initial reluctance to add new members

Colas Gustave de la Noue was the first new member admitted in June at the recommendation of Lallier. He was a writer and poet.
There was initial reluctance to add to the membership.

Lallier would also recommend adding Charles Hommais. Bailly recruited Emile de Condé. Ozanam would suggest Chaurand, Gignoux and his cousin Pessonneaux. By summer break there were between 13 and 18 members.
More New Members Added
A few members were added in the summer (including Jean-Leon Le Provost), but over 25 members (many from Lyon) were added in the fall when the university resumed.

Portraits of these Older Members

Joseph Arthaud
Paul Brac la Perriere
Amand Chaurand
Louis Janmot
In Autumn of 1833 the Conference meetings were moved to Bailly’s Pension at 13 Place de l’Estrapade because he moved out of his newspaper office and the group needed more space.
At conference meeting February 4th 1834, Le Prevost suggests St. Vincent de Paul as patron

Later that year the Conference of Charity is renamed the Society of St. Vincent de Paul
A new pastor, Fr. Faudet, came to St. Etienne-du-Mont in January of 1834. Bailly made sure that he was aware of the work of these students.
Every Tuesday morning after Mass, Chaurand would meet him and report on the work of the conference and seek his advise. This would be reported to the conference that evening.

Amand Chaurand
Bailly understood that greater support from the clergy would be required as the organization grew. He asks La Noue to prepare a report to be read at the meeting on June 27, 1834.
At Bailly’s invitation Fr. Faudet attends the meeting and is impressed with the group and their work and promised to support Bailly and the conference.
The conference grew rapidly, to over a 100 members within a year.

In December of 1834 dividing into two conferences was passionately debated; the move was strongly pushed by Ozanam.
History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul

The Society Grows

Graph. 2 – Recrutement cumulé de la conférence de charité
(23 avril 1833-8 décembre 1835).
Recruitment of members 1833 - 1835
The debate on Dec. 31, 1834, is intense, and Bailly calls it off at midnight. Brac la Perriere is the principal speaker against the split, and Ozanam advocates in favor.
Bailly appoints a study group to make a recommendation. On Feb. 17, 1835, the vote favors a split into two groups.
History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul

The Society Spreads

Original conference of St. Etienne-du-Mont splits adding St. Sulpice

St. Philippe du Roule and St. Medard added soon afterward
Felix Clavé was instrumental in forming the conference at St. Philippe du Roule with the help of the pastor, Fr. Maret.

Assistance was provided by a team of visitors consisting of Frederic Ozanam and Francois Lallier.
This demonstrated that the structure could be duplicated in new parishes.

A **Council of Direction** was established in 1835 to coordinate conferences, later called the Council General.
History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul

The Society Spreads

Rule developed 1835

Preliminary notes written by Bailly; Lallier wrote the main body of the document
History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul

The Society Spreads

Spread rapidly throughout France

Nîmes – Feb. 1835
Lyon - Aug. 1836
Nantes – Jan. 1837
Rennes Jan. 1837
Dijon – April 1837
Toulouse - Apr. 1837
Graduating students establish two conferences in Lyon in 1836. The members include five of the first twenty original founders. Their suggestions for alterations to the Rule are taken seriously by the Paris Council.
The Lyon conferences are united by a Council of Direction headed by Ozanam. The dialogue between the Paris Council and the Lyon Council created a structure that allowed local control while maintaining a unified organization.
Emmanuel Bailly resigns in June of 1844
Leadership passed to dedicated successor
President General Jules Gossin,
President 1845 – 1847
Pope Gregory XVI approved the aims and methods of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. The papacy at the end of 1845 enriched it by bestowing indulgences upon members.
Spread rapidly outside of France:

*Se extendió rápidamente fuera de Francia:*

Rome - 1842
England & Ireland - 1844
Belgium, Scotland & United States - 1845
Holland, Greece, Turkey & Mexico - 1846
Canada & Switzerland - 1847
Austria & Spain - 1850
# History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul

## The Society Spreads

### Dates when Western Hemisphere Conferences were First Aggregated

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<th>Country</th>
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<tr>
<td>Haiti</td>
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Rule revised in 1836 to define Councils of Direction

Regla revisada en 1836 para definir los Consejos de Dirección

Graph. 12 – Organigramme de la Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul (1836).

Il n'existe, au moment de la rédaction, que quatre conférences à Paris mais l'extension en province – qui a échoué à Nîmes dès 1834 mais que laissent pressentir les premiers retours d’étudiants – et à l’étranger est déjà prévue dans les statuts.
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Rule revised in 1839 to define Particular Councils

Regla revisada en 1839 para definir Consejos Particulares

Art. 4 Should several conferences be formed in the same town, each takes the name of the parish where its members meet, and the several conferences are united by a Particular Council, which takes the name of the town itself.
Rule revised in 1839 to define Particular Councils

Art. 28. **The Particular Council** is charged with those works and important measures which interest all the conferences of the town.

_Particular Councils today may also be called District Councils or Zone Councils_
Rule revised in 1839 to define Particular Councils

Art. 29  It decides on the allocation of the common fund... This fund is intended to meet the expenses of the special works of the town, and sustain the poorer conferences.
Special Works typically overseen by a council

When there was a particular council (or district council) the special works were organized by the council.
Special Works typically overseen by a council

1836 in Paris
Printing apprenticeship for orphan boys including housing and education
Special Works typically overseen by a council

1837 in Lyons

Club for Soldiers included a library of over 500 books. Taught reading, writing and arithmetic and gave spiritual counsell.
Special Works typically overseen by a council

1838 in Lyons
young Vincentian doctors started
a clinic to provide health care
and included a free pharmacy.
Special Works typically overseen by a council

France in 1840
The Society provides aid to flood victims at the request from both the government and ecclesial leadership.
Rule revised in 1839 to define Particular Councils

Regla revisada en 1839 para definir Consejos Particulares

Graph. 14 – Organigramme de la Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul (1839).

Il existe 38 conférences françaises en 1839, dont 22 en province. Le nouveau règlement entérine cette situation et fournit le cadre provisoire de cette extension jusqu’à l’apparition de conseils diocésains et supra-diocésains (dits centraux) pour la France et nationaux (dits supérieurs) pour les pays étrangers.
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Source : d’après le Règlement de la Société de S. Vincent de Paul, Paris, Imprimerie de E.-J. Bailly et Cie, place Sorbonne, 2, 1836.

## History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul
### Organizing Growth with Councils

### Development of First Councils

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<td>Nantes</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1850</td>
<td>Bordeaux</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marseille</td>
<td>1850</td>
<td>Reims</td>
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REGULATIONS

FOR THE

UPPER COUNCILS.

(Extract from the Bulletin of the 1st of May, 1850.)

For many years the really providential spread of the Society has, in the countries situated outside France, rendered an institution necessary which our first rules did not anticipate, namely, that of Councils charged with the direction of the Conferences of an entire country, and constituted as intermediate between the Council-General, the centre of all the Society, and the Conferences separated from it by distance, language, and local customs.

This institution, self-begotten, so to speak, has become happily extended, and has contributed, by its development, to the progress of our work in foreign countries, where otherwise it would have penetrated with difficulty, and where particularly it would have sustained itself with
National Councils established in 1850

“For many years the really providential spread of the Society has, in the countries outside of France, rendered an institution necessary which our first Rules did not anticipate namely, that of Councils charged with the direction of the Conferences of an entire country.”

(from the Bulletin 1 May 1850)
Adolphe Baudon
President General from 1848 – 1886

Because of his capable and vigorous leadership he is sometimes referred to as a second founder.
Took office at the age of 29

His 39 year term was the longest in history during which he guided the Society through difficult times and tremendous growth.
History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul
Organizing Growth with Councils

Graph. 6 – Agrégations cumulées des conférences de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul en France (1833-1872).
Our founders created structures that adapted to the changing needs of a growing organization.

What changes need to be made in the organizational structure of SSVP in your councils to allow the Holy Spirit to continue to grow our Society?
Bishops and clergy in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, try to create a Society of St. Vincent de Paul under their direction, using the name but a different structure.
In some conferences, clergy were presidents, and sometimes a bishop controlled the council. One such council is granted indulgences for their version of the Society.

In 1851 Baudon asks the Archbishop of Paris to appeal to Rome for assistance.
The Society is given a cardinal protector by Pope Pius IX to solve this and future problems.
“the intention of His Holiness is that any action or grant affecting the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and subordinate associations based in France or elsewhere, is to be stopped until it be first and properly reviewed by the cardinal protector.”

The Letter of Cardinal Antonelli to the Nuncio of France July 24, 1851
PART II
STATUTES OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION
OF THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL.

1.2 The name of the Society

The International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is the sole owner of the Society’s name. Only the Council General may, on behalf of the Confederation, authorise or prohibit the use of its name.
The Persigny Suppression
Fearing that any movement organized nationally could threaten the government, Victor Persigny, French Minister of the Interior, disbanded all the Councils of the Society from 1861 to 1867
All French Councils are Suppressed

From 1861 to 1867 only conferences were allowed to operate in France. This created an organizational difficulty for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.
El Papa Pío IX le otorga a la Sociedad un cardenal protector para resolver este y futuros problemas.

Persigny Circular

Third Republic

World War I

Baudon Elected
History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul

Nombre de Conferences en % dans les differentes parties du globe en 1860-1882-1912-1932

La surface α de chacun des cercles est fonction du nombre total des conferences
History of the Society of St Vincent de Paul

A final milestone – In 1968 women were accepted as active members in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Blessed Frederic’s dream:

“To embrace the world in a network of charity.”

El sueño del Beato Federico:
"Para abrazar el mundo en una red de caridad".
How is the Holy Spirit working in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul today?

What are the challenges or obstacles to continuing to build our network of charity in our community and throughout the world?