Paris, 31 January 2019

CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, AND MEMBERS OF CONFERENCES OF THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL AROUND THE WORLD

*2019 –Year of **Paul Lamache***

1. Introduction

Lord Jesus Christ be praised!

To my dear brothers and sisters, new applicants, employees of our headquarters and works, dear collaborators and volunteers, spiritual advisors, friends of Vincentians, and the International Vincentian Family.

I am very happy once more to write to you all, for the third time since I was elected 16th President General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, all my brothers and sisters around the world, members of Vincentian Conferences, in this Circular Letter 2019, year of the 180th anniversary of the International Council General and the International Year dedicated to Paul Lamache, one of the seven founders[1] of our beloved Society.

Circular Letters have been a tradition among the Presidents General since 1841, when our brother Emmanuel Joseph Bailly de Surcy wrote the first one. Since then, we have received a wealth of letters written by my predecessors, of excellent quality and which have in a way created a body of doctrine for the SSVP. I hope, from the bottom of my heart, that this Circular Letter is useful for the international Vincentian community; this is the intention of the President General who now writes these lines.

As it is fairly length, I suggest dividing this Letter into blocks or themes and read short sections of it in the meetings of the Vincentian Conferences. I would be really glad to receive your comments, criticisms and suggestions regarding the content of this Letter. Please send them to the following email address: cgi.circularletter@gmail.com, created to receive your messages.

I remind you that, happily, many of the themes listed in the Circular Letter 2019 were suggestions I received from brothers and sisters from Conferences, as the Circular Letter is actually reaching all Conferences, and being carefully considered, in the collaborative spirit in which we work. Thank you all for the excellent impact this document is having, not only among the active members, but also among volunteers, employees, the clergy, the Catholic press and collaborators of the Vincentian work.

I would like to ask you to include some names in your usual prayers, especially during Conference meetings. Pray for me; pray for the Vincentians who agreed to help me with the international service in the Council General; pray for the presidents and for the boards of the Superior Councils; and pray that the Vincentian leaders, as Ozanam[2] said, will be holy people.

May God save us from all the difficulties and troubles of this world, and may we, in the name

***1** The Society of St. Vincent de Paul was founded in Paris, France, on 23 April, 1833. The first meeting was attended by Antoine-Frédéric **Ozanam**, Emmanuel-Joseph **Bailly de Surcy**, Pierre-Emmanuel-Félix **Clavé**, Jules-François-Louis **Devaux**, François **Lallier**, Paul **Lamache**, and Pierre-Auguste **Le Taillandier** - seven founders forming what we call a 'collegiate foundation.' Ozanam, whose canonization process is at an advanced stage, is the most famous among all of them, but he never wanted to be the 'sole founder.' In many countries, the SSVP is described as having been founded by Ozanam only, which we know is not fair to the other founders. The Council General has emphasized the testimony of all other founders, for example by creating the 'International Themed Year' project, an excellent opportunity to learn about the legacy, ideas, life, work and thoughts of all those men sent by God who, inspired by Divine Providence, knew how to love the poor and decided to act and search for holiness to build a better world.*

***2** From the book entitled 'Antônio Frederico Ozanam: um modelo, uma referência' (José Garcia, Porto, Portugal, 2018).*

of the Lord, promote faith through works of charity, among ourselves first, and among those who suffer. These two dimensions of the SSVP (friendship among members and solidarity with the poor) are the signature of Vincentians, and we pray to God that we may always remain on this path, without divisions, conflicts or disputes. And may we practice together what Jesus told us: "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."[3]

I hope you all enjoy reading our Circular Letter 2019.

2. The Council General

Every day I see the scale of the important role with which I have been entrusted by my Vincentian brothers and sisters who elected me to be the President General. I am aware of my limitations, faults and the huge challenges facing the administration of a Council of global dimensions, considering that it has 155 territorial areas, 50,000 Conferences and 800,000 members. It is a huge responsibility for just one President; that's why we have the International Structure and the collegiate board comprised of men and women, young people and adults from the five continents who have agreed to share with me these responsibilities and the responsibilities of managing the Confederation.

The loving support from these collaborators and staff of the general headquarters in Paris is helping me lead the SSVP until my term finishes, and introduce innovations and improvements that, God willing, will be incorporated into the daily routine of the Council General in the future. I am always surprised when we write annual reports, seeing the number of achievements of the Confederation, with full support from Superior Councils, the Permanent Section, the International Executive Committee, the 'Concordat' (group of nations that provide financial support to the Council General) and other decision-making groups in the Council General. Every leader working in every department, advisory body, coordination or other service is highly dedicated and shows great commitment to the goals defined in our international strategic planning. Together, we are moving forward, seeking to implement a greater number of projects with the same economic and human resources available.

I would like to highlight here a long list of items from the current board, but to keep it short, I will mention just a few, such as the Ombudsman General, the SSVP Plus Project, recovery of the recollections of the seven founders (film festival and thematic years), Ozanam's canonization process, good relationships with the Church, opportunities for international associations and agreements, full support to youth, international fraternal support (Twinnage and CIAD), updating of training modules, close relationships with the Vincentian Family, among many other initiatives which the Council General has been pleased to take.

In 2019, we hope to reach our maturity in the international administration of the SSVP, as we approach the middle of our term, learning from good practices adopted by each Superior Council. In every missionary institutional visit to a country, I learn a lot and I bring these improvements to put them into practice at an international level. My recent trip to Africa, for example, reminded me that it is possible to promote charity with limited economic resources because God gives us creativity and courage to serve the poor. It is possible to perform charitable actions without having a penny in our pockets; good advice, a helping hand and a word of encouragement can produce wonderful effects for those in need[4].

This year, we celebrate the **180th anniversary** of the Council General[5]. During the year, we will

3 *Mark 9:35.*

4 *That's how Frédéric Ozanam thanked Emmanuel Bailly for the wise advice provided to those university students, who became founders of the SSVP. "They didn't have many economic resources, but they had great enthusiasm" (Ozanam's letter to Bailly de Surcy, 3 November, 1834).*

5 *To ensure the growth of the SSVP across continents, always in agreement with the Rule and the ideals of the seven founders, our predecessors decided to create the Council General at a meeting held on 14 July, 1839, as a development of the Council in Paris. This decision was confirmed at the assembly on 21 July, 1839. In those days, there were 16 Conferences in Paris and 22 outside Paris. However, the first meeting of the Council General only took place later, on 27 December, 1840. This information was taken from the book of Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée 'The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the 19th Century.'*

publish several articles, reflections and information about the brilliant ideas of our founding pioneers, when proposing the creation of a superior body to take care of the qualitative and quantitative[6] growth of Conferences. That's how the Council General was born, as a development from the former Board of Directors.

In this Circular Letter, I'd like to speak a little more about **four strategic areas** of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul: training, youth, communication, and expansion of our organization.

Training is so important for the International Council General that this topic is #1 in the list of 10 items of strategic planning: "Continuous training for all members." To achieve this goal, the International Vice Presidency for Education and Training was created, with the support of 12 territorial training delegates, working in partnership with the International Territorial Vice Presidencies. The Council General considers training a top priority in the SSVP and, for this reason, it developed a global structure to deal with this huge challenge.

When I became President of the SSVP, I received from the previous administration a series of excellent training modules that comprise the "Universal Training." Now, we are adding new themes to the international training program to offer countries updated and attractive content, in several languages, with more interactivity, not forgetting the pillars set by our founders[7].

Another priority of SSVP's current administration is **youth**. In the structure of the International Council General, youth has a voice, receiving special attention and performing a leading role. The International Vice Presidency for Young people, Children and Teenagers is a service which has developed and been very fruitful. We've chosen **4 July** as the International Youth Day to honour blessed Pier George Frassati, a young Italian Vincentian who died at the age of 24 from health problems he developed after visiting needy families.

Last year in Salamanca, Spain, the Council General held the 2nd International SSVP Youth Meeting, once more aimed at promoting the work of the International Vice Presidency for Youth. During the event, 12 new members joined the international team to support the Council General in defining strategies for youth. The event was a big hit, with national representatives showing their strength, willingness and dedication. In five years' time, the young Vincentian leaders will meet again for the 3rd International SSVP Youth Meeting.

The Council General provides full support to young Vincentians, children, teenagers and young adults, knowing as we do that they are the source of renewal of our Society. It would be worth expanding opportunities for exchanges among young people from different Superior Councils, so that they can share good practices, learn from and teach each other. It would be really exciting for countries to work together developing this initiative for the benefit of the SSVP, as today's young people[8] will be tomorrow's Vincentian leaders.

I would like to take this opportunity to ask the Councils to set aside a small amount from their budget for youth activities. They need economic resources for recruitment meetings, training courses, publication of advertising and motivational materials and national trips, among other things; these resources are critical to support the work of youth delegates. Congratulations to the Councils that have already adopted this practice!

For this reason, the International Council General decided that, on **4 July 2019**, an "SSVP Special Collection for Youth" will be held in each country and that the total amount collected will be converted into a "SSVP Youth Fund" to be managed by the Superior Council (or equivalent)

6 *In a letter to his friend Guéranger (5 July 1833), Emmanuel Bailly wrote: "This Conference is definitely having impressive results that are beyond all expectations." We recommend reading the book "Frédéric Ozanam: an intellectual at the service of the poor", by Gérard Cholvy; chapter IV of this book covers the period when the Charity Conference was created.*

7 *This President General prefers to use the word 'founders' instead of 'cofounders' to make all seven pioneers equal in importance for the history of the SSVP.*

8 *"The main purpose of the Society is to create a group or association of mutual help for young Catholics, where friendship, support, example and a model of Christian family are found" (text published in part III of the book "Laical" issued in 2000 by the Superior Council of Spain, which brings prayers, reflections, spiritual readings and devotional texts to Our Lady and other saints).*

in each nation. I am sure the generosity of brothers and sisters will raise sufficient resources to promote actions for the young people of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Thank you for your support! The collections will be made at the Conference meeting on **1-7 July 2019** or sooner.

Communication is also another major topic for the Council General. We know well that the key to success of organizations lies in the combination of efficient communication and comprehensive strategic planning, and it's no different in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. During this administration, we've taken great strides, and the entire international Vincentian community hopes the Council General makes further improvements to our communication processes, especially in the dissemination of programs, projects and initiatives under development. With excellent communications by the Council General, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul can operate better on a global level.

The international communications team, based in Madrid, has performed an excellent job and so we are very happy with the work so far. The international site has been completely redesigned, and is now more attractive and educational, with more information and new documents about the history of the SSVP; besides, other training materials will be added to the website soon. Another new resource on the website is the Ozanam Network, which gathers news from the Council General and the Vincentian countries. It is very interesting to see Vincentian work across the globe, and the bulletin gives a good picture of the activities of the SSVP.

We've just launched the "The Seven Founders" Film Festival, which will give awards for videos and films about the historic times of the SSVP foundation. The awards will be made in September 2019, and by then we hope to have many audio-visual works entered. This festival is one of our initiatives to celebrate the 180th anniversary of the International Council General. Entries are accepted until **15 May 2019**, under the rules of the contest.

In June 2019, during the plenary sessions of the Council General, which will take place in Porto, Portugal, we will launch the song "The Seven Founders" to further enhance the collegiate character of the SSVP foundation. I'm sure this song will be a big hit and will be played at all Vincentian events around the world.

The official international logo, approved in 1999 and in force since 2001, is another strong instrument of our communication and unity. The Council General has just approved a small modernization of the design to facilitate the insertion of the country's name outside the blue circle. It was a common complaint we received every place we visited, and now we've found a solution. The "International Logo Usage Manual" will be distributed soon and we expect the countries to follow its instructions and standards. Using, defending and disseminating our logo is a generous sign of unity and, above all, it shows our respect for the 'hierarchy of love,' which is the main feature of human relations in the SSVP.

In 2019, we are planning to launch a new SSVP international institutional video. The current video was produced in 2013 and needs to be updated, because life is dynamic and statistics change. The new video also needs to introduce the SSVP to its different audiences, such as entrepreneurs, the Church, donors, governments, and philanthropic entities, among other social groups. It will be a short video, no more than 5 minutes long, with images, colours and songs. It will be recorded in several languages, and we hope it will be very useful for the entire SSVP.

All this effort will only be worthwhile if the Superior Councils help disseminate the news, articles, circular letters and reflections that are published by the Council General. This partnership is critical and, above all, it highlights the contact we have with Paris and the legacy of our founders.

The SSVP **expansion** through the SSVP Plus Project is another achievement of the officers of the Society. We've restructured the project, assigned a new manager, and reserved a proper annual budget to add at least five new countries per year to our international charity network. We've already included Liberia, Cyprus and Albania, and we intend to reach new areas, like Gabon, Morocco, Cape Verde, the Cayman Islands

and Greece, to mention just a few countries. Thank you to the Superior Councils that have supported the Council General in the expansion of our institution!

My dear 12 International Territorial Vice Presidents are essential for the implementation of the SSVP Plus Project, as they identify opportunities for SSVP expansion. I will be very involved in this project in 2019, making prospective visits to some of the countries with the Territorial Vice Presidents.

Also, I am pleased to report the creation of the 'Charity in Hope' Medal, which is a way of giving public recognition from the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to the associations that provide relevant humanitarian and social services, especially to needy nations. In 2018, the Rotary Club received this recognition. Superior Councils can recommend associations by **28 February 2019** to the Council General, which will choose one group to receive the 2019 medal.

3. Recommendations to Vincentians

By the grace of God, I've been able to be visit many places worldwide, spreading a message of peace, charity and unity from the Council General to the hearts of all Vincentians. On my travels, I've seen many wonderful actions, showing how the SSVP effectively contributes to building a better and more Christian world. I've witnessed numerous examples of holiness among brothers and sisters, giving us reasons for great joy as these people are seeking what is most important: holiness for themselves and for other people in the community, through the mission we have to bring hope and salvation to the People of God.

On the other hand, I've seen some behaviours and attitudes that must be avoided, as they take us away from God, leading to spiritual condemnation. As we know, the ultimate outcome of the work of the SSVP is the holiness of our members; so the undesirable situations I've observed in some parts of the world need to be completely eliminated.

Vincentians ought to be a light. Just as our Lord Jesus Christ said, a light should shine out, and never be hidden under the bed. Vincentians must not shy away from giving testimony of the faith, nor must they exercise this apostolate in a timid or muted way. We are called by God to be 'salt of the earth and the light of the world,'[9] as engaged lay people[10], so that the people around us, on seeing us, also see the face of Christ, the sweet features of Mary, the loving look of Vincent and the lifestyle of Ozanam and the other founders. If we act in this way, we will truly be a light to humanity so deprived as it is of the values of the family, the Gospel and charity.

Vincentians ought to be an example of tolerance. In our unequal society[11], the role of Vincentians takes on a new importance, so that, as well as the traditional characteristics of our identity, we need to add five more elements: tolerance (in this selfish and uncompromising world), patience (in our fast-moving, anxious society), good humour (in unhappy and divided social environments), warm-heartedness (in this individualistic, vain and competitive world), and a smiling face (in inhumane and sorrowful environments). These conditions, together with a charitable nature and the Vincentian virtues[12], are key factors in enabling us to offer greater

9 Matthew 5:13-15.

10 *"We must therefore face this world with its values and problems, its longings and hopes, its achievements and failures. This is the field in which the lay faithful are called to fulfil their mission. Jesus wants us to be salt of the earth and the light of the world. Let's also consider the multiple violations to which humans are subjected today: ideology, economic power, inhuman political systems, scientific technocracy, invasion of social communication media" (Apostolic Exhortation "Christifideles Laici"- Vocation and Mission of the Lay People in the Church and in the World, by Pope John Paul II).*

11 *When we speak of social inequalities, it is important to mention that the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is a concrete response to this situation, just as the preaching of Ozanam is, The Church encourages lay people to be active participants in CST in all segments of society, not only in evangelization, but, above all, in our human relations. Vincentians, because of their social reach and their broad understanding of real life, are best-placed to witness, experience and disseminate the Church's Social Teaching.*

12 *The five virtues, as preached by Vincent de Paul himself, are: simplicity, humility, self-denial, meekness and apostolic zeal. These are attitudes Vincentians should have. Helping the needy requires full commitment to the virtues of St. Vincent, showing genuine love and respect for less fortunate people. I suggest reading the SSVP Rule, which contains important recommendations about Vincentian virtues.*

respect and better service to people in all kinds of material or spiritual need[13].

Vincentians must be unconditional non-conformists. I use the term "non-conformist" here to indicate a sense of challenging society, something which is always one of the concerns of all Vincentians. It's not possible to compromise with the world or accept its principles, when we are strong advocates of life, faith, and the Scriptures. In the case of refugees and migrants, Vincentians can never be insensitive to their suffering, and can never support political decisions that, instead of solving the problem, create more barriers and exacerbate radicalism. The world needs peace, and the Vincentian message goes precisely in this direction, strengthening the culture of peace[14].

Nor can we passively accept attacks on Christian values made in the media, in schools, and by political players, defending a worldview that is completely different from the one proposed by Jesus Christ. Here, our greatest example is Ozanam[15], who answered God's call to defend the Church and faith.

We should be heralds of the Gospel, acting with respect and dedication towards those who suffer, but also denouncing all forms of evil, exclusion and segregation among human beings. Today, there is extremism and uncertainty all over the planet, generating fear and anger among people. We need greater peace of mind. The social situations that demonstrate this terrible trend are sadly a huge and growing concern. Today's problems, such as lack of charity for refugees, selfishness that limits altruistic actions, terrorism that injures defenceless people, and abortion[16] and euthanasia that shorten life, must be fought by all Vincentians, so that we can offer and be witness to, an alternative way, the saving message of Christ for humanity.

Vincentians may disagree, but always with charity. We are different, we have different cultures, different opinions, which is natural and understandable. But when it comes to the poor, we must adopt a convergent attitude, seeking unity and resolving any conflicts, using gospel and Vincentian values as our basis. We cannot and should not act on the basis of worldly values. We have to be different, especially among ourselves. Let's avoid conflicts in the SSVP, in the Vincentian Family or in the clergy, because this behaviour doesn't come from God. Charity must reign in our personal, professional, family, and ecclesial relationships. There is room for everyone in the SSVP, as long as everyone can bring good things and add values. If any Vincentian is at a difficult moment, he/she can also be helped, and we will reinforce the "second network of charity" which I always mention when writing to you.

Vincentians should seek holiness. Holiness is the central objective of all Vincentians. First, Vincentians should seek holiness by receiving the sacraments and keeping the commandments, by their active presence in the Church, and their life in prayer. With these values and proper training, Vincentians will do their works of charity even better. Then, let's always seek holiness, although we know it is a complex thing to achieve, because we are sinful, imperfect, vain, selfish, and ungrateful, and such characteristics are like stones in the path of holiness[17].

I also want to send a special message to brothers and sisters who have experienced difficult personal situations. We are not immune to problems such as financial debt, illness of family members, unemployment, educational

13 *In the Letter of August 1837, Secretary General François Lallier addressed several of these virtues recommended to Vincentians, with the emphasis on kindness.*

14 *John 14:27: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

15 *We recommend reading "Antoine Frédéric Ozanam" written in 2017 by our fellow member Raymond Sickinger, from Indiana, United States. Its chapter 10 (servant leadership) explains how Ozanam based his models and life on Jesus and St. Vincent.*

16 *On 3 May 2018, the "Official Declaration of the SSVP to Support Life" was published on the website of the International Council General. The text emphasizes: "We don't accept arguments, threats and mechanisms against life! We won't build a just society with peace and prosperity if we admit the right to murder human beings, especially the most helpless and innocent ones. It has never been a cause that we can defend, accept, tolerate or compromise. We also believe there is no coherence or rationality in this way of thinking. No one – nations, government systems, and non-religious activist groups – can deny the right to life to other human beings. As Vincentians, we are eternal and untiring advocates of life! This is a task we can't refuse as a civil association of lay Christians, devout and committed to the Kingdom of God."*

17 *In item 16 of Apostolic Exhortation "Christifideles Laici"- Vocation and Mission of the Lay People in the Church and in the World, Pope John Paul II talks beautifully about holiness.*

issues, family problems, depression or other illnesses. Many of these things also happen to us, since we are ordinary people, and therefore are subject to the same evils and suffering as everyone else. Vincentians are not immune to such sufferings, disappointments, frustrations, betrayals, harms, indifferences, and deceptions of the world. In the work environment, Vincentians faces many obstacles. And when dealing with their own children, brothers and sisters constantly see issues involving drugs, rebelliousness in adolescence, bad company, and poor prospects for young people.

We are not immune to all these issues! But the difference here is that we are able to go through these negative moments, because we have not only our Guardian Angels, but especially the 'Vincentian spiritual army' led by St. Vincent de Paul and his 'good soldiers,' as well as the seven founders, Rosalie Rendu, Louise de Marillac, Jean-Leon Le Prevost, and so many others to help us and intercede for us before God. We are not alone, and God will not abandon us. To all Vincentians who are experiencing such problems, I give you my sincere message of hope, peace and faith.

I would like to tell you about the **importance of prayer**, the sacraments and the active spiritual life of Vincentians. I have seen very active Vincentians working to provide practically everything to help needy people. But this social activism is not always properly connected with the religious practice that leads us to meet Jesus through charity. The Conferences are places of prayer[18], faith, religious life, and friendship. We can't limit our Conferences to the simplistic concept of an 'operating centre' that provides social services to the poor. In many places of the world, there is greatest need for basic necessities of life, it is easy to understand why Vincentian Conferences adopt a more material attitude; however, the various types of needs will require different and creative forms of support, involving a broader view of such needs.

We have to **return to our origins** and, together with the social services we offer to those in need, we have to maintain and strengthen our own essential conditions, as taught to us by our seven founders, based on the combination of 'holiness and charity' and the Social Teaching of the Church[19]. The further we move away from the teachings of the founders, the more we will become simply a great NGO doing social work and, of course, we will move away from our identity and the Vincentian Charism. Sometimes I am surprised with the questions people ask me in the various countries I visit. I realize that most of these questions are due to the lack of good Christian and Vincentian foundations. Thus, I strongly request all Vincentian Conferences of the world to offer proper training to the new applicants, before including them in the list of active members. Don't be hasty in accepting new Vincentians to the Conferences of St. Vincent: they need time to learn about our values, and learn to love and follow them.

My final recommendation in this Circular Letter of 2019 to all Vincentians in the world relates to **education**[20]. We Vincentians, have worked for almost 200 years since the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was created on many fronts and from many perspectives, especially those related to material poverty, rooted firmly in economic and social causes. We also help people in other forms of poverty, especially spiritual, geographical and existential poverty[21], which add

18 *In the book "Praying for 15 Days with Frédéric Ozanam," written by French fellow member Christian Verheyde, we see prayer was always the most important aspect of the life of Conferences, followed by the practice of good works. "Prayer had its place already at the first meeting, and today it protects the Conference at every meeting: thanking God for prayers answered, prayers for the families we support, worshipping God who guides us and whom we feel among us. But prayer must be complemented with material, affective and effective support. Prayer without action or action without prayer won't work at all."*

19 *One of the most interesting publications about the relationship between Ozanam and the Social Teaching of the Church is the book "Frédéric Ozanam: his multiple faces," produced by the SSVP's training department in Medellín, Colombia. The Encyclical "Rerum Novarum," of 1891, by Pope Leo XIII mentions Ozanam's idea on "injustice, inequalities, dignity of labour, fair wages, fair taxes, the right to property, and reduction of the suffering of the less fortunate"(chapter 7).*

20 *In 1928, the International Council General published a document entitled "Training of New Conferences and Education," which mentions possible work Vincentian Conferences can do on this subject. The booklet also contains some tips on recruiting new Vincentians, the various forms of charity, human and economic resources of Conferences, the operations of Conferences and the steadfastness of brothers and sisters. I recommend reading this useful and very topical book.*

21 *Read the message of Pope Francis for World Youth Day (2014), celebrated on Palm Sunday in 2014, whose theme was "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). In this message, the Supreme Pontiff explains how Jesus renewed his call to each of us to become*

to the other huge challenges faced by civil society today, such as depression, loneliness, prejudice, migration, drugs, environmental destruction, and urban violence.

These fields of work are still relatively unexplored by the Vincentian Conferences, since brothers and sisters do not always have proper training, experience and skills to deal with these demands. Governments, civil society, international agencies, NGOs and the Church itself have struggled for centuries to mitigate the harmful effects of poverty[22] in the world, but without apparent success, only with palliative programs here and there. The challenges are huge, and we do not always find support from those who have resources and should help us; instead, they isolate themselves in selfishness. Therefore, the SSVP establishes cooperation agreements and institutional associations with social organizations that can help us in this difficult task of providing social services[23].

A recent Unesco report[24] shows that the number of poor people in the world (1.5 billion people) could be halved if all adults were able to complete high school (for young people aged 15 to 17). It seems a simple detail, but it's very important: a person's educational level reduces poverty. One may even live in economic simplicity, but never in misery. When people have a good quality of education, they are out of the cycle of poverty and can see new horizons for themselves and their families.

Unesco's logic is in line with the vision of the SSVP and the Vincentian Family on how to overcome poverty in the world: through systemic change. I think we all know that, but there is a huge gap between 'knowing' and 'solving the problem.' Most countries in the world that have emerged from poverty – many of them experiencing natural disasters or terrible wars – have been able to provide their citizens with a quality education from early childhood to university.

One of the noblest actions that a Vincentian Conference or charitable work can perform is to enable education to the people we help. I don't mean buying school supplies, uniforms or shoes, but, above all, providing education itself, which involves extra costs such as language courses, sports and cultural activities, community actions, among many others. Our Vincentian commitment should be not just for the basic human necessities, but, above all, to enable our friends in need to reach their full potential. This way, the Conference will be more effective than merely distributing foods or other material goods.

I think it is worth quoting an excerpt from "The causes of poverty," an article written in October 1848 by Frédéric Ozanam for the New Era newspaper. He refers to education as a concrete way to destroy the chain of poverty. He argued that along with the community meals served to the poor in Paris, classes should also be included, so these people 'would return to their homes brighter and better.' In another paragraph, Ozanam advocated the opening of night schools, Sunday schools and 'Arts and Crafts Centres' in the French capital.

Education can change the world and it can reduce poverty, as stated by Unesco. We have to incorporate this truth into Vincentian daily life and, this way, we will improve the way our Conferences work, in order better to serve those who suffer in the world. Nothing is more important than that. What have we done to improve the education of those who receive support from Vincentian Conferences?

4. International Thematic Year of Paul Lamache

As the 16th President General, I am pleased to announce that 2019 is the **INTERNATIONAL**

missionary disciples, saying that we should know how to share the "most precious treasure of our lives with the furthest flung places and the margins."

22 *According to data from the United Nations, there are now (2018) 1.5 billion people in the world today classified as 'poor' and 900 million who are in danger of falling into poverty due to conflict, disease, drought, unemployment and other problems. In addition, half of all people living in poverty in the world are under the age of 18. To end extreme poverty by 2030, according to the World Bank, all nations have to increase their investments in health and education. The "International Day for the Eradication of Poverty" is celebrated on 17 October every year to promote reflections on the theme, just as Pope Francis declared 18 November the "World Day of the Poor."*

23 *Book "Ozanam e a questão social do século XIX" (Álvaro Queiroz, Maceió, Brasil, 2018).*

24 *http://uis.unesco.org/en/news/world-poverty-could-be-cut-half-if-all-adults-completed-secondary-education*

THEMATIC YEAR OF PAUL LAMACHE, one of the seven friends who, in 1833, joined together to create our beloved Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Just as the Thematic Year of Bailly (2017) and the Thematic Year of Lallier (2018) were big hits, encouraging and inspiring all members of the SSVP all over the world, now it's time to learn more about Lamache.

On **8 February 2019**, the International Council General will launch the third International Literary Contest, "The First Conference - Paul Lamache." Texts that present new or little-known aspects of Lamache's personal, professional, Vincentian and family life, or which highlight his contribution to the first Conference and the expansion of the SSVP around the world will be considered for the award.

Of the founders, Paul Lamache (1810-1892) lived the longest. Lamache was born in a village called Saint-Pierre-Eglise in Normandy, a region in northern France, about 350 km from Paris. He came from a family of farmers and administrators who served local nobility. His father was a doctor and the mayor of his hometown.

He moved to Paris to study law at the Sorbonne, just like Ozanam and the other founders. In 1832, Lamache met Ozanam and joined him in the 'History Conference,' playing an active part in discussions. He wrote many articles for different magazines and other media of the time, and was very outspoken on current ideas. He was the first Catholic writer to declare himself firmly and publicly against slavery and its harmful effects on humanity.

At the end of his law course, Lamache married Henriette Lebon d'Humbersin in 1844. They had five children: Paul, Adrienne, Henri, Léonie, and Marie.

Lamache was also a scholar in the field of education, and actively participated in campaigns to promote the importance of teaching and quality education, defending religious education in schools.

His academic life was admirable: rector of the Academy of Côtes-du-Nord, professor of Roman law at the University of Strasbourg, and professor of Administrative Law in the French cities of Bordeaux and Grenoble. His political-institutional views meant that he vigorously protested against any new legislation that would eliminate the social rights of the poor.

He was part of the National Guard during the French Revolution of 1848, just like Ozanam and the 3rd President General (Adolphe Baudon), as well as many other members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Lamache, his sister Rosalie Rendu, François Lallier and Frédéric Ozanam received the Legion of Honour award. Lamache died at the age of 82 in Grenoble. He was the last of the seven founders to die.

With such an eventful biography, the International Council General believes that the International Competition, "The First Conference - Paul Lamache" will be as successful as its predecessors, in which awards were given to Vincentians from different parts of the world. This is exactly what we want: to learn more about the life and work of our founders, their qualities, virtues and flaws. This is one of the main goals we are aiming to achieve during the term of office of this Council General.

According to the competition rules that will be published on the Council General website (www.ssvpglobal.org) in the coming weeks, very similar to those for the 2017 and 2018 contests, cash prizes[25] will be awarded, for the winning writers and for their Conferences. We are sure the academic work about Lamache will be equally rich, like that produced about Bailly and Lallier, with interesting facts and details of the life of this man who is so important to the history of the SSVP.

I invite all Superior Councils to publish articles and reflections focused on the important role of Paul Lamache in the process of the SSVP foundation, encouraging the development of studies on his life and work, addressing personal, professional, academic and Vincentian aspects, and helping the Council General to mark the 2019 International Themed Year.

25 *We would like to thank the Central Council of South Tyrol, of Italy, for the generous and constant help that enables the International Council General to award the prizes every year.*

I also request that on **8 December 2019**, the last day of the International Year of Paul Lamache, Masses are said around the world for the founders of the SSVP, particularly Lamache. In this way, the current Board of Directors of the Council General is working to make the seven founders better known, loved and admired, since the SSVP foundation was a collegiate action and all seven "founding fathers" are equally important in the history of the new Society.

5. Conclusion

Dear Vincentians, the Circular Letter is a document written by the President General directly for brothers and sisters, giving his thoughts and reflections on Vincentian praxis, proposing changes and renewing our attitudes.

From time to time, it is good to reassess our actions, think ahead and adjust our strategies. To assist in this process, I suggest members should answer the five questions below to help them improve Conferences and Councils, and their associated works:

a) *What do we need to **STOP DOING** in the SSVP?*
b) *What do we need to **KEEP DOING** to continue our mission of charity?*
c) *After this evaluation, what do we need to **START DOING** to improve Vincentian effectiveness?*
d) *What do we need to **DO MORE?***
e) *And finally, what do we need to **DO LESS**?*

I am sure that as we reflect on these issues, in our hearts and in the meetings of the Conference, we will direct our energy and power to the right path, that is, towards improving the Vincentian works for those who suffer: the Poor of God.

All of us, Vincentians of the 21st century, need to be aware that, with God, the work we do, however quietly, is very effective and has generated important results for people who undergo some kind of difficulty, not only in material terms, but above all, the new types of needs that require different kinds of charity, such as care in different ways for the elderly, addicts, refugees, abandoned people, and orphans.

In order to respond to these new challenges, we also need a more modern and dynamic Vincentian training that is open to the needs of today's world.

Be firm in the wonderful work you are performing around the world! With Jesus Christ and Mary, Vincent and Ozanam, I'd like to thank you for your attention. May 2019 be a year full of achievements for our Vincentian Conferences. My fraternal affection, always serving in hope.

Brother **Renato Lima de Oliveira**
16th President General