



CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR FELLOW MEMBERS OF THE CONFERENCES OF THE SOCIETY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL AROUND THE WORLD

2023 - International Year of JULES Gossin

*A much-needed reflection on the challenges of the post-pandemic period,
the importance of succession-planning for Council General, and the
departure of the President General and Board.*

Paris, 31 January 2023

1. Introduction

Praise to our Lord Jesus Christ! Once again, I am delighted to write, for the seventh consecutive year¹, to my dear fellow members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul around the world, as well as to new members, volunteers and staff at our various projects, Councils and Conferences. May our Blessed Lady show us the path of charity², promoted so well by Saint Vincent de Paul.

This year, 2023, I end my term of office as the 16th President General International of our International Confederation, an honour for which I was never properly prepared. Only with God's help was I able to reach the end of this path, with many successes on the basis of our 10-point strategic plan, thanks to the dedicated work of the International Board and the Superior Councils.

In this "International Year of Jules Gossin" (2023), we are also celebrating the 190th anniversary of the foundation of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and the 210th anniversary of the birth of Blessed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam³. These are very important dates for us all, brothers and sisters, and I hope that many events will be organised to mark them, all over the world.

So as I always say: the writing of a Circular Letter is a gift from God for any President General. I hope that members of our Society can reflect on the sections of this Circular Letter, and I count on you for any comments, criticisms and suggestions, by e-mail: cgi.circularletter@gmail.com. "Anyone who wants to be first, must be the very last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9, 35). Good reading! 🙏

¹ It has been the custom since 1841 for Presidents General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul to write Circular Letters. During this term of office, I have been able to write eight of these letters (in 2020, the year the health crisis began, I wrote a special letter dealing with the effects of the pandemic on us members of the SSVP, and especially on the people in need). The Circular Letters are snapshots of a moment in human history, and I feel blessed to be able to leave these lines as a reminder for all.

² "Over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Col 3,14).

³ On 23rd April, the Council General has arranged to have a Thanksgiving Mass, broadcast live.




2. Council General is making progress

2.1. Highlights

During these seven years in office, with God's grace, Council General has undertaken many very successful initiatives, despite the Covid health crisis and the war in Ukraine, while these two distressing episodes in human history have brought in their wake much death, despair, unemployment, emigration, inflation, energy crises, and other collateral effects.

It is difficult to point to one or other specific thing that could be seen as “the most important”, during our term. I will mention some of the initiatives on which National Councils often comment: the opening of the new head office; the spread of the legacy of the seven founders; the promotion of the role of their fellow members and the figure of Amélie (Ozanam’s widow)⁴; the acceleration of the canonisation process for Ozanam; creation of the position of Membership Commissioner; progress in terms of youth; management, training and communications; expansion to new countries; broadening of solidarity work; and transparency in Council General’s operation, among other aspects.

We expanded our training operations during the health crisis, bringing communications up to date and increasing transparency. Chief among these are the “Talk Show with the President General”, the “Ozanam Network” newsletter, Ozanam TV, our strong social network presence, the “Lanclub” (translators club), the new webpage and the new official video. We have a really impressive communications team, and every week at least three news items are published on our website. Communications have been among the fields making most progress in the past seven years.

However, I consider our greatest success and best characteristic to be the closeness between Council General and Vincentians on the ground. As I often say: let us increase dialogue among ourselves, the members, because the “second network of charity” (among ourselves)⁵, is essential if the “first network of charity” (with those in need) is to be fruitful. The more we love, know and value the International Council General, the better can we understand our role as fellow members of the Society. For this reason, I always carry with me the flag of our Society, throughout the world, because it is the Society that must shine, not ourselves, who are simply the instruments and “worthless servants”⁶, trying to be “good stewards”⁷. 

2.2. Alone, we are nothing

⁴ Organised by Matthieu Brejón de Lavergnée, publication of the book *"Amélie Ozanam: a heart with much love to give"* (2022), in English and French. It is well worth reading.

⁵ More detail about the second network of charity is available in the publication *"Apasionados por la caridad y la justicia" [Passionate for charity and justice]* (2017), Renato Lima de Oliveira, Madrid (Spain), in Spanish.

⁶ Luke 17, 7-10.

⁷ Luke 16, 1-13.



The Rule is wise to state that alone we will not end social, economic and regional inequalities, but we must work in collaboration with other bodies. At Council General, we have moved closer to various humanitarian institutions, through signing collaboration agreements, for example, or the award of the “Charity in Hope” medal, recognising the important social work of these organisations, many of which are not Catholic.

So we have signed agreements with the Religious Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul, with MISEVI, Fraternity without borders, and with the Scouts. Our relations with the Church itself, with the Vincentian Family and the United Nations have never been so fruitful. I have devoted space to some particular topics, because I believe it is the primary role of the President General to have this type of institutional focus. In all our interactions with these organisations, we never abandon our own principles, but fight with them against all forms of poverty we encounter, not only material poverty, but above all moral, spiritual, and digital poverty. 🌐

2.3. Role of Vincentian youth

Youth work is very special to me, as I joined the SSVP when I was 15⁸. So today's young people can rely on me and on Council General for everything, as I come out of the Vincentian youth movement. We have a very energetic international team, and over the seven years of this term of office, they have made tremendous progress. We celebrated the 2nd International meeting in Salamanca (2018), we produced manuals and leaflets, carried out the global census, promoted competitions⁹ and events online, encouraged exchange programmes, held a special collection for youth, and set up the International SSVP Youth Day on 4 July. We have formed the “Department for childhood and adolescence”, under the auspices of the International Vice-presidency, and we hope that all this progress can be maintained by future administrations, since these Conferences already exist in more than 10 countries of our Confederation. I thank God sincerely for the young people, who every day are working within our Society. 🌐

2.4. Close relations with the Holy Church

This closeness to the Church is essential, and very beneficial. It is an honour for us to form part of any of the Vatican's commissions, groups or projects. It is an even greater honour to belong to three Dicastries, as we do. The Dicastery is the equivalent of a Ministry in the government of a country. The Pope appoints people (religious or lay) to form the eight existing Dicastries, and SSVP members belong to three of them: “Family, Laity and Life” (participating member), “Integral Human Development” (permanent member), and “Communications” (observer).

I try to attend meetings of these Dicastries in person, collaborating with the Holy See in its on-going initiatives. We members act as “consultants”, giving suggestions when asked by the Pope. Being in these Dicastries also helps us in the process for Ozanam’s canonisation, because

⁸ Mario Maringulo, a member from Brazil, has written an excellent work on Vincentian Youth (Brazilian and International), in the book “*El rostro joven de la SSVP*” [The young face of the SSVP] Colección Vicentina nº 48 (2014).

⁹ For Felgueiras and Lisbon, we have established a competition which will allow 12 young people, all expenses paid, to attend the Youth Days with Pope Francis.



the more we move around the corridors of the Vatican, the more visible and well-known we become. When I am in Rome, I also often give interviews to Vatican Radio, and always contact the media at the Holy See. 🌐

2.5. Vincentian strengths

The most important feature of the daily life of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, throughout its long history, in my view, is its resilience in the practice of charity¹⁰. No matter what the problems, crises, governments and cultures they find, Vincentians remain the same: devoted, discreet, evangelising, counselling, guiding, and defending the faith. Members stand up for life, are against drug-use and euthanasia, and on the side of families. These are all characteristics of SSVP members.

The Vincentian is always restless, seeking to help those most in need, no matter where, when or how. Never vain, proud or egotistical. Born an altruist, the Vincentian thinks of others rather than of self, aspiring for heavenly things. This is our greatest legacy to humanity.

Times have changed, humanity has changed. It has evolved in many ways (quality of life, hopes for life, communications, transport, the internet, etc.), but there is also regression, above all in virtue and morals. It's painful to listen to people talking about a flexible approach to drug-taking, or accepting euthanasia. It is contradictory to see people mostly defending vaccines, but supporting abortion. In this sense, the SSVP, like the Church, has adapted to the times, but without in any way abandoning its principles, values and direction. Comparing 2016 to today, I believe that we have made much progress in our management of various areas, and there are new initiatives which will now endure. I am satisfied with the new features we have introduced in terms of governance, transparency and the democratic process in Council General. 🌐

2.6. Approaching canonisation

A priority of the present term of office on the International Council General, along with the most wide-reaching of the strategic areas (training, communications, youth and good governance), is the canonisation process for our beloved Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, the principal founder of our Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. We have properly focused our efforts, so that all the documents relating to a second, supposed new miracle, attributable to the intercession of Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, have been delivered for examination to the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints.

We are following closely all stages in this process, always attentive to any request for further information from the Vatican authorities. I am always pleased to recall that I myself¹¹, without having been vaccinated, went to the Vatican to deliver the documents for the process. God protected me on this mission. At the moment, the Vatican doctors are studying the documents to

¹⁰ "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first" (Revelation 2, 19).

¹¹ I went to the Vatican on 20 October 2020, to deliver the documents.



see if there really was an extraordinary cure.

I ask all members and spiritual advisers to continue their prayers in their Conferences, in their personal prayers every day, and if possible, for those who are able and willing, to fast on the 23rd of each month, in a spiritual campaign to obtain the grace of the canonisation. As well as the fast, the Council General has proposed to the Holy See that Ozanam should be declared a “Doctor of the Church”. We have to bring Ozanam into our daily lives, asking him to act at all times in the family, at work, in school, in the local area, anywhere and in any situation. 🌊

2.7. Missionary visits

During the seven years of my term of office, many people have asked me: How have you managed to visit around 50 different countries? I have very limited time for international travel. This too is something extraordinary that God has allowed in my life. The more I travelled, the better was I received¹². People sang Brazilian songs to me. They tried to speak Portuguese to me in every country I visited¹³. I received prizes, praise and medals on behalf of the humanitarian work the SSVP does throughout the world. They produced leaflets with my photo and offered kind words of welcome which I will never forget.

I have been received by political leaders from several nations. I do not deserve any of this¹⁴, of course, but this public acknowledgement has been offered for my service as President General, representing all the members around the world. In Africa, I was able to see how it is possible to be charitable without money, seeking the right alliances and the most suitable social projects to help lift the community out of poverty. I received particular protection from the United Nations, as if I were a real Head of State, when I visited a country in a state of total civil war. There were strong emotions that will always remain in my heart. 🌊

3. Approaching elections for the new President General

3.1. Rule and Electoral Commission

October 15th was the closing date for Superior Councils to send their nominations to the Electoral Commission, for appointment of the 17th International President General, to take over from our mandate. There is no limit to the number of applications countries may submit.

I experienced this feeling in 2015, when 12 countries put my name forward for this distinguished responsibility. I did not believe they would elect me, because the other candidates were much more qualified and competent than me. But God's plans are like that: he calls, chooses, prepares, sends and provides those selected¹⁵. So in 2016, with 61% of the votes, I was

¹² Luke 4, 21-30.


¹³ Romans 2, 11.

¹⁴ Luke 17, 7-10.

¹⁵ Exodus 31:1-18.




elected 16th President General International, the first Brazilian.

Time has passed, and in June 2023, we will have new elections. As the Rule states, the Electoral Commission¹⁶ has full authority to publish the electoral rules and organise the whole process. I pray God that good candidates come forward, truly committed to the SSVP, who can continue the good efforts we have begun during this term of office. 

3.2. The electoral process

The electoral process is fairly lengthy, beginning in June 2022 at the SSVP's International Plenary meeting in Paris. At that point, the process opened with the due publication of the "electoral rules", which may be found on the Council General's website (www.ssvpglobal.org)¹⁷.

The Electoral Commission will comply fully with the principles given in articles 3.3 to 3.8 of the International Statutes, explaining the electoral process, the voting system, and rules for a second round of voting, among other things. I recommend those involved should read this part of the Rule carefully. In order to qualify as a candidate¹⁸, the Vincentian must have been a member of SSVP for more than 15 years and be below the specified age limit.

From 16th October, the Electoral Commission is following the approved schedule. The candidates proposed by Superior Councils will be contacted to see if they accept the nomination, which is not obligatory. If they do accept, they have to send a number of documents and evidence to the Commission. Shortly after that, these documents will be examined, and if they are approved, the candidates will be announced publicly on 13 March 2023. This all will be translated into four languages (English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese). 

3.3. Finalists

On 13 March¹⁹, as the final names are announced, duly approved, the Electoral Commission will send the voting papers to the countries, for the choice of candidate. At this stage, votes are by post, and the Electoral Commission will not accept any vote by e-mail or other digital media.

The big day will be 13 June 2023, in the afternoon, in Rome (Italy), when national presidents will place their votes in the ballot box. These votes will already have been sent by post, and it is these which will be placed in the ballot box. If there is a second round, only the presidents attending will vote. Each Superior Council has one vote, regardless of the size of the country.

¹⁶ Formed of Joseph Pandian (Vice-president General), Larry Tuomey (General Treasurer), and Marie-Françoise Salesiani-Payet (Secretary General).

¹⁷ With four appendices: information sheet about the candidate, brief statement of intent, Vincentian CV, and statement that the person is an active, unpaid, member.

¹⁸ As well as these formal conditions, it is recommended that the person should speak a number of languages, have management experience, and organisational skills.

¹⁹ Also on 13 March, prayers to the Holy Spirit will begin for the success of the election, and no campaigning will be permitted for or against the candidates.



After the count, and the announcement of the result, the President General elect will read the “Vincentian Promise”, in which they commit to comply with the Rule and other regulations. The inauguration ceremony will be held in Paris on 9 September 2023. Between the election and taking up the post, the new leader will have three months to set out the new strategic plan, present a draft organisation chart for the Council General, choose a motto and invite colleagues for the six-year term of office. I ask your prayers for the success of these elections. And I offer my thanks to all those who have always supported me in the role of President General. 🙏

3.4. Good successors

The happy Vincentian tradition recommends that Presidents in office prepare their successors, and we have done this, with God’s grace. The candidates coming forward meet all the administrative, spiritual and moral conditions to be elected as 17th President General. In my humble view, the best leader must be competent in what they do; be a model of leadership²⁰ for other members; be insightful, capable of taking risks and decisions; be a visionary, able to inspire and motivate others; be an empathic person, fair, sensitive to the requests of their fellow members; above all be an ethical person, familiar with the first principles of our Society and of the Vincentian charism.

In one of his letters²¹, Ozanam highlights the conditions needed to be a good Vincentian leader: “have great piety; be kind to others; be selfless without losing the fraternal spirit; have experience in good works (that is, know the reality of life for the poor); keep the SSVP on the path of simplicity; gain the trust and respect of all; be close to all the members, especially the youngest; always be a bond of union; be an example for life; and know how to combine charity with the prudence that maintains it”.

Pope Francis, in an address to Latin American trainers, meeting at an event in Rome²², highlighted three conditions for leaders: “be people of closeness, tenderness and prayer”. I believe that a good President General should also combine these three characteristics. Closeness, to accept difference; tenderness, to live with empathy; and prayer, to be able to overcome life’s adversities. So, we must follow the guidance of Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam²³ and of Pope France, in the election that will be held in Rome on 13 June 2023, during the SSVP’s General Assembly. 🙏

4. Spiritual recommendations

As I do every year, I am devoting a whole section of the Circular Letter to addressing some situations and incidents which have come to my attention, both through my personal contacts

²⁰ I recommend reading the book *“For Your Love Alone”* (2020), written by our fellow member Michael Syslo, who devotes much of the work to highlighting the qualities of servant leadership within the Church and the SSVP.


²¹ 11 June 1841.

²² 11 November 2022.

²³ For more about Ozanam’s social side, we recommend reading the book *“Un pionnier et un précurseur: Frédéric Ozanam”* [A pioneer and a forerunner: Frédéric Ozanam] (1953) by Louise Yvonne Camus, Téqui Éditeur, Paris (France).



with members and spiritual advisers during my missionary journeys, and through the Membership Commissioner. These are topics on which I need to reflect carefully, before giving a firm opinion.

I believe these topics deserve reflection from all of us, so that Vincentian action might be more efficient and effective, as Saint Vincent de Paul would wish²⁴. Some of the ideas presented here may be useful for Councils facing particular challenges at the moment. It is very likely that a reader of this Letter might not agree with some of what I write here, but at least they will know what the President General is thinking. 

4.1. Good works increase divine grace in us

The Catechism of the Catholic Church²⁵ teaches us that divine grace is a free gift, helping us to seek salvation, instilled in us by the Holy Spirit, to save us from sin and sanctify our souls. Divine grace is always present, because God is always available and ready to receive us in his infinite mercy, through the works of the Beatitudes (corporal and spiritual works of mercy).

Divine grace increases; that is, the more we seek it with a true heart, the more we will find it. Saving grace comes from God, and at the same time is a gift for us all. How can we obtain God's grace in our daily lives? There are many opportunities the Heavenly Father gives us, to achieve and strengthen grace in us.

The first way to obtain divine grace is through the sacraments, especially baptism, which allows us enter the Kingdom of God. Through baptism, we are received as children of the Almighty, freed from original sin, and become brothers and sisters in Christ, taking part in the plan for salvation. As well as baptism, the first step to obtain the grace of salvation, the other sacraments offer us the opportunity to become better people, closer to God and more united with our brothers and sisters. Communion and confession, for instance, are excellent ways to grow in holiness²⁶.

But it is not just the sacraments alone that bring us providential grace. Daily prayer and reading Holy Scripture are also means to build our relationship with God, helping to overcome our sorrows and sinfulness, empowering the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and bearing witness to the wonders of the Lord around us. As well as all these opportunities, there is another special one for us, as members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and of the Vincentian Family: good works, that increase the presence of divine grace in us. Practice of good works pardons a good part of our sins²⁷, relieves our human ills²⁸ and strengthens our charity²⁹.

²⁴ I recommend reading the book "La vraie vie de Saint Vincent de Paul" [The true life of Saint Vincent de Paul] (French Edition) by Antoine Redier, first published 1927, Kindle edition available, a rich source of information about the life of Saint Vincent de Paul, focusing on an examination of his virtues and his initiatives on behalf of the poor.

²⁵ See articles 1996 to 2005.

²⁶ One of the fullest accounts of Vincentian sanctity is the book entitled "**Modelos Vicentinos**" [Vincentian Models], published by the Superior Council of Portugal in 2006.

²⁷1 Peter 4:8.


²⁸ John 21.

²⁹ 1 Cor, 13.



Only those who are filled with the Spirit do good works. Egoists, the proud, vain and indifferent ones, will never manage to undertake good works. These good works are not only corporal actions (giving food, drink, clothing, etc.), but above all they are spiritual (giving good advice, calming conflict, acting with moderation, etc.).

So the sacraments, prayer and the practice of good works are the recipe for holiness, which God in his grace grants us at all times. It is enough for us to make use of these tools to achieve the spiritual benefits so necessary in our lives, in the daily experience of Conferences, and in contact with those most in need³⁰.

We remember that Our Lady³¹ was blessed with abundant graces, as the angel of the Lord said: "Hail, full of grace". And can we see ourselves also as "full of grace"? So, dear sisters and brothers, let us not relax on the path of the Lord, because our mission is, above all, to make people happy through charity, fraternal listening, empathy and tolerance, virtues³² which regrettably are despised by the secular world in which we are placed. 

4.2. We are all poor

When we use the word "poverty", our thoughts generally turn to material poverty, that is, deprivation of goods, which is the most visible aspect of poverty³³. It is certainly the first and most common meaning we have of this word. However, the term "poverty" also refers to other situations in life, including moral, spiritual or emotional poverty. Saint Teresa of Kolkhata once said that "the lack of love is the greatest of all the poverties", and in the same way, Pope Francis commented: "Lack of Christ is the greatest of all poverties".

The world in which we live is very unfair, as we well know, and the gap between rich and poor - materially speaking - is vast. But humanity contains plenty of moral and spiritual poverty: only one eighth of the world's population believes in Our Lord Jesus Christ, and this may perhaps be the reason for so many wars, so much prejudice, for abortion and euthanasia, drug-use and violence worldwide.

We are all poor³⁴, as Jesus said: "The poor you will always have with you". In expressing himself in this way, Christ was not "condemning" humanity to everlasting poverty, but underlining the fact that we are all sinners, and thus all are poor. Further on he stated, more strongly, that being far from God represents death³⁵: "Let the dead bury their dead".

For Christ, there is poverty whenever we are separated from the Heavenly Father. Whenever we move away from God, through sin and the power of evil, we are poor. As long as we are not

³⁰ I recommend reading the book *"Through the eye of a needle"*, by our fellow member Austin Fagan (1989), London (England), which shows how SSVF members work with those in need in times of uncertainty and change in civil society.

³¹ Luke 1, 26-30.

³² One of the best Vincentian books on the virtues is *"Perfezionamento Spirituale e Carità Cristiana"* [Spiritual perfection and Christian charity] (2004), Edizione Studium, Rome (Italy). I recommend reading it.

³³ One of the truest accounts of this topic is the book *"Poverty"* (2003), written by Fr Raniero Cantalamessa. I recommend reading and reflecting on it in our Vincentian Conferences. The book has been translated into dozens of languages.

³⁴ John 12, 8.


³⁵ Matt. 8, 22.



doing works of mercy, we are poor and miserable. Whenever we desire evil, we are poor³⁶.

When we are egotistical, prejudiced, indifferent, overbearing, vain and proud, we are poor. When we do not defend the Holy Church and, adopting a “politically correct” attitude, or when we do not denounce the evils of this world, we are poor. When we accept the law of the end of the family, and leave ourselves out of it, we are poor, unhappy.

We might have a good job, an income, our own home, a car, travel opportunities or other material goods, but this is of no use if we have no connection to God. Financial prosperity is worth nothing, without living in Christ's love, without practising charity and without the grace of the sacraments. Attachment to money, and obsession with material goods, also make us poor³⁷.

The only way to achieve true riches is to be united with God, through Our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the wealth that is worth winning. The Catechism teaches us that the sacraments and the practice of charity are the means recommended³⁸ to help us follow the steep path of personal holiness. And the only poverty Jesus asks of us is that of poverty of spirit³⁹: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. So let us love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and all our mind⁴⁰, because only thus shall we be rich. And paraphrasing Saint Paul⁴¹, who said “when I am weak, then I am strong”, I say: “when I am poor, then I am rich”.

5. The challenges of the post-pandemic period

5.1. The impact of the pandemic

It cannot be denied that the pandemic has affected the whole human race, and obviously it has also affected our Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Many Conferences have ceased their work, and we will not always manage to revive these groups in future. When the doors of a Conference close, it is the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul that dies, little by little. So the Council General has set an example, and has not stopped working for a single moment.

I am always optimistic. People who know me, know how I think, act and study humanity. I always see life in a positive way, even when there is so much egotism, materialism, prejudice, lies and lack of faith around us. In the case of the Covid-19 health crisis which affected the whole world, and caused death, unemployment, hunger and disharmony among people, there was at least a positive “secondary effect”: the pandemic had a positive impact on solidarity⁴², and on on-

³⁶ I recommend reading the book *"Serena disponibilidad, prudencia y misericordia"*, [Calm readiness, prudence and mercy], by the Spiritual Adviser to the International Council General, Father Andrés Motto (CM), Librería La Milagrosa (2022).

³⁷ Psalm 40.

³⁸ Titus 1, 8: “Be hospitable, love what is good, be self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined”.

³⁹ Matt, 5, 3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.


⁴⁰ Luke 10, 27.

⁴¹ 2 Cor, 12, 10.

⁴² International surveys and studies show that community assistance to those in need increased, above all among the most affluent classes (A and B), but not only there. People in less well-off social classes (C and D) have also made a great contribution, not always with money or donations, but with their time, devotion, moral support, with a smile, or with advice for helping in cases




line training.


In fact, what we note is that those who were already supportive became more so during the pandemic. In the same way, those who were selfish and individualist also became more so. Today, with the pandemic under control⁴³, the question that matters is as follows: what are the challenges in the post-pandemic period? There are many, for governments as well as for the population itself, for the Church and also for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. As President General of our Confederation, I have a global view of this particular issue, and I offer below five challenges for us to consider, which we need to overcome urgently, starting now. 

5.2. Challenges for now and for the future

5.2.1 Revitalise our Conferences, and modernise our practices

The pandemic made it clear that some of our Conferences were “frozen in time and space”, their work of charity insufficient, although important, focused on material good. Poverty is not material alone, as Jesus teaches us⁴⁴; it is also spiritual and moral. We have to open ourselves to all forms of poverty, and train our brothers and sisters to specialise in more varied areas, dividing Conferences internally into working sub-groups, focusing on the various forms of poverty. The home visit⁴⁵ has been, since our foundation, our main work, but it is not the only one⁴⁶ and so, the more varied is the work of the Conferences, the better will we serve those in need. 

5.2.2 Encourage our members and bring Vincentian training up-to-date

The pandemic showed how useful on-line training was during the health crisis, and helped us keep people mobilised and involved. The crisis thus taught us that we need to deepen Vincentian spirituality⁴⁷, the charism uniting us and the virtues distinguishing us from other social organisations⁴⁸. It is vital to update Vincentian training, to boost the training of SSVP members with new topics: mental health, employment and income, human relationships, crisis management, etc. 

of poor mental health. All, rich or otherwise (in terms of money), showed their solidarity, and tried to help.

⁴³ There is a book published in 2014, before the coronavirus pandemic, very well produced and full of guidance about the most appropriate steps for the SSVP to take in the face of the challenges in the world today. It is called “**Changing Lives**”, London (England) (www.svp.org.uk).

⁴⁴ John 12, 8.

⁴⁵ A useful guide to home visits was written in French. The book is called “**Manuel Pratique des Lois Sociales et Ouvrières**” [Practical Manual of Social and Employment Law] published by Council General in 1923, Paris (France).

⁴⁶ Article 1.3 of the Rule of the International Confederation: “**No form of charity is foreign to the Society**”.

⁴⁷ One of the fullest expositions on Vincentian spirituality is “**Laicado Vicenciano para el Tercer Milenio**” [Vincentian Laity for the third Millennium (2003), CEME (Salamanca, Spain), Edición “Evangelizare” nº 45.

⁴⁸ 1 Cor, 13, 13.



5.2.3 Improve our procedures and reduce bureaucracy

The pandemic has shown that the administration of our Society needs to be improved, updated and redesigned, both in Conferences and in our works and at Council level. We are sometimes too slow to make changes and take decisions, and delay too much in accepting improvements. The excessive number of rules⁴⁹ also freezes us, preventing us from acting as quickly as we need to. One useful step, which I think we could adopt in future, is to allow hybrid meetings (in-person and on-line), held throughout the month, assuming this does not affect the practical help we give to those in need. It is a shame to admit it, but we have lost many opportunities, and we could have been more pro-active towards the most vulnerable people. Other social NGOs were more flexible and less bureaucratic than us, and we have to recognise this, expressing our “mea culpa”. 🙏

5.2.4 Expand the ways we do charity, and welcome those who are suffering

The pandemic showed that mental illness perhaps had a greater impact than the problems originally associated with the health crisis. It has never been so important to carry out a psychological assessment, in caring for the mental health of people⁵⁰. Are our Conferences properly prepared to welcome those people who are suffering in silence? Do we know how to listen? Are we really welcoming, or just content to deliver bags of basic products, or have friendly chats? 🙏

5.2.5 Opening up to collaborative efforts with other organisations, to be more effective

The pandemic has made it clear that we cannot alone tackle the causes of poverty and hunger, and that on our own, we will only deal with the superficial aspects of its effects, perpetuating this unhappy situation. We need to be open to other institutions, without ever abandoning our own original spirit⁵¹. There has been no culture of closeness between SSVP and other social organisations, so we have to break this taboo, and work collaboratively, as an organised civil society.

In order to bury, once and for all, the pandemic and the hypocrisy which accompanied it, we must take off our masks and return to normality. We are not afraid⁵², because God will never abandon his people. Dear Vincentians, let us move forward, without fear, trusting in divine Providence and seeking creative and innovative solutions to renew and strengthen our Conferences in order better to serve the poor. 🙏

⁴⁹ *Isaiah 28, 10.*

⁵⁰ *Matt 11, 28-30.*

⁵¹ *Romans 15, 5-7.*

⁵² *Matt 10, 26-33.*



6. Year of Gossin

6.1. The “International themed years” project

The “International themed years” project is one of the most evocative aspects of the present term of office (2016 to 2023) of the International Council General⁵³. In the last few years, we have been able to discover and love more our seven founders⁵⁴: 2017 (Bailly de Surcy), 2018 (Lallier), 2019 (Lamache), 2020 (Clavé), 2021 (Devaux) and 2022 (Le Taillandier). Before that, we organised a writing competition, called “The First Conference”, focused exclusively on the founding fathers of our Society. From 2023, we are entering the second phase of the project, now called “Historic Vincentian Characters”⁵⁵, studying the life and work of Jules Gossin (2nd President General). For 2024, thanks to the cooperation agreement signed with the Religious of Saint Vincent de Paul, we will devote the project to our fellow member Jean-Léon Le Prévost.

On **8 February 2023**, the International Literary Competition for “Historic Vincentian Characters - Jules Gossin” will be launched on the Council General’s webpage. This will reward essays which offer new or little-known details of the personal, professional, Vincentian and family life of the 2nd President General, as well as his contribution to strengthening and expanding the SSVP worldwide.

The International Council General believes that this new stage of the essay competition will be as successful as the previous one, devoted to the seven founders, prizes for which were awarded to Vincentians from all over the world. This is just what we want: a wider, better understanding of the life and work of the historic characters of the SSVP, their qualities and virtues, as well as their flaws.

In line with the rules⁵⁶, the general guidelines will apply as for the previous competitions, as well as the cash prizes⁵⁷, both for the winning authors and for the Conferences in which they work. We are sure that the academic work on Jules Gossin will be just as valuable as in previous years, offering interesting features and details from the life of this man who was so important in the SSVP’s history.

Council General suggests that on **8 December 2024**, the closing date of the “International Year of Jules Gossin”, a thanksgiving Mass is celebrated in all parishes around the world for the special intention of the memory of the 2nd President General. Also on 1 April, the date of his death,

⁵³ The “International themed years” project covers not only an essay competition, but also the launch of a commemorative stamp for the character concerned each year, creation of a special logo, a film festival, and a song about the seven founders. Another action in this project is the visit to the tombs of these Vincentian characters, which the Council General Board makes each year.

⁵⁴ At the end of the term of office, we intend to publish a book containing the winning essays from each year.


⁵⁵ Suggestions for future years, which I will humbly submit to the new President General taking up the position on 9th September, include the following characters: Adolphe Baudon, Amélie Ozanam, Rosalie Rendu, Celestina Scarabelli and Antonin Pagès. The writing competition will be based on the lives of these key figures in the rich history of the SSVP.

⁵⁶ The basic rules for producing the texts will be published (number of pages, structure of the text, bibliographical sources, languages accepted, deadlines, prizes, etc.).

⁵⁷ We thank the **Central Council of South Tyrol**, Italy, for its generous and on-going help to enable the International Council General to reward the winners each year.



Conferences may recall his story by reading a text about him as the spiritual reflection for the Conference meeting. And throughout the year, I invite all Superior or National Councils to publish articles and reflections about Gossin, stimulating a study of his life and work, in the personal, professional, academic and Vincentian spheres, to assist Council General in the effective completion of the Themed Years project⁵⁸.

I hope many members from all over the world will take part in this competition. As President General, I am proud to have established this important project, and to see how very useful it has been for our Society. Today, we know much more about our founding fathers, and also about other notable characters from the history of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. 

6.2. Who was Jules Gossin?

Auguste-Sébastien-Jules Gossin was born on 20 January 1789⁵⁹, in the town of Bar-le-Duc (France), 230 km from Paris. His parents were Pierre-François Gossin and Gabrielle Vayeur. Jules Gossin had four brothers: Gabriel, Henri Félicité, Joseph and Pierre-François. He graduated in Law from the University of Paris on 1 August 1809, and worked as a lawyer and magistrate throughout his professional life, including as a counsellor to the Appeal Court in Paris. He wrote dozens of articles and legal texts, relating to the law but also on religious matters.

In 1813 (the year Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam was born), he married Mme Anne-Henriette Leblanc de Closmussey (1796-1857), and they had eight children⁶⁰: Mathilde, Théodore, Marie Nicole Gabrielle, Joseph Henri, Léon, Eugène, Marcel and Théodore. In 1826, Gossin founded the "Société Charitable de Saint François Régis", created to assist the marriage of the poor, and for the legitimisation of children born outside marriage⁶¹. He worked closely with Sister Rosalie Rendu, from whom he received the basics of the Vincentian charism.

Gossin was one of the first members of the Society, very probably recruited by Louis-Joseph Baudicour (a relative), or else by Bailly de Surcy, in 1833 or 1834. In February 1835, the Society took the difficult and important decision to split into two Conferences. One group continued meeting in Bailly de Surcy's boarding house, adopting the name of St-Etienne-du-Mont, with Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam as its president. The second Conference would take the name of Saint-Sulpice, with Jules Gossin as president, and the group met in the offices of the Société Charitable de Saint François Régis, of which he was also chairman, close to the Church of Saint-Sulpice.

Gossin was elected 2nd President General on 23 April 1844, after the resignation of Emmanuel-Joseph Bailly de Surcy (1st President General), who pleaded family and professional

⁵⁸With this event and other initiatives relating to the "International Themed Years" project, Council General strengthens its commitment to increase understanding of the origins and beginnings of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, included in the international strategic plan, and which is one of the most notable aspects of this term of office.

⁵⁹ The year Gossin was born (1789) was a landmark for humanity, as it was then that the dreadful French Revolution broke out, with persecution of the Holy Church, a dark time for European history, ending with the appearance of an authoritarian leader who disregarded all frontiers and invaded several countries: Napoleon Bonaparte.

⁶⁰ Other authors note that they had five children, not eight: Marie Nicole Gabrielle, Léon, Mathilde, Eugène and Théodore.

⁶¹ The author Pierre Delacomté (1913) wrote a short, 16-page work entitled "**Jules Gossin, fondateur de la Société de Saint Régis**", describing in detail Gossin's activities in this other Society of which he was a founder member.



problems, and Gossin held the position for four years until 1848. The historical records show that it was Jean-Léon Le Prévost who put forward the name of Jules Gossin as President General.

In a circular letter of 1844, Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam highlighted some of Gossin's virtues: "The Council General has found a member who will do honour to the Society. His name is known to those receiving assistance, esteemed by Catholics, respected by all: Jules Gossin. He is a man, of whom there are few of his kind today, concerned only with family, studies and good works. A man whose heart is capable of any devotion."

He was a very humble man. In his circular letter of 15 August 1844, Gossin stated: "On 23 April 1844, despite my unworthiness, I was chosen, as the objections I had the honour to submit, asking for a search for a less unworthy person, were not accepted". He was, without doubt, the example of a servant leader. He took up his role on 25 July 1844, and fulfilled it until 1848. During his term of office, on 10 January 1845, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul obtained official approval from Rome, and the recognition of numerous indulgences. At that point, the SSVP already had more than 9000 members around the world.

In his Circular Letters⁶², Gossin frequently expressed his concern for politics within the SSVP, the importance of home visits, the need for annual reports from Conferences and Councils, the importance of young people in the daily life of the Conference, the lay character of the SSVP, interaction with priests, and the qualities needed by Vincentian leaders.

His Circular Letters were full of very practical advice, needed to maintain the early vision of the Society, and follow the Rule. His letters also contain further fatherly wisdom⁶³, such as that of enlivening the Conference meetings to keep a sense of humour: "No Conference offends charity, when laughter is allowed among members. Sometimes laughter is excellent: it reawakens attention, avoids dreaming, encourages warmth and eases discussion. Attendance at the Conference meeting is a serious duty, but there is no conflict in being open to happiness, free communication, which fills the meeting at particular times"⁶⁴.

The 4th President General, Antonin Pagès, examining the main characteristics of his predecessors, expressed himself as follows in a circular letter: "Bailly de Surcy was the founder; Gossin was the interpreter of the Rule; and Baudon the one responsible for expansion abroad". It is clear that Gossin was a lawyer with an excellent professional reputation, who also used his legal knowledge to serve the SSVP. Jules Gossin was a notable lawyer in Paris. He was a magistrate and Vice-president of the Seine Tribunal, as well as a counsellor at the Paris Tribunal.

In his Circular letter of 1 November 1847, Gossin, pleading health problems, announced he was resigning as President General. In his farewell message, ever humble, he was afraid he had not "built up" the members who recommended him.⁶⁵ However, his work as President General

⁶² He wrote some famous words, which still today give us pause for thought: "What the President is, the Conference is also", "The Society does not hoard money; it gives according to its means", "Boredom in a Conference is like smoking out a beehive", and "Of all the consolation that we can give to the poor, the greatest is that which we ourselves receive when we listen to them".


⁶³ On one occasion, Gossin gave some strange advice to young Vincentians. At this period, smoking was very common. So he suggested to young people that they used the "pipe, the cigar and the cigarillo" in moderation, so that, saving their tobacco money, they could buy more bread for the poor, "as well as enjoying better health". This type of advice shows that not only was he a President General who guided the progress of the young organisation, but he was also a devoted father figure for the young people he led.

⁶⁴ Circular letter, 1 November 1847.

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was very fruitful⁶⁶. Gossin's successor was the young Adolphe Baudon (1819-1888), only 29 years old, who remained in post for 38 years, from 1848 to 1886. In a circular letter on 25 November 1847, announcing the opening of the electoral process, Ozanam vigorously praised Gossin, and listed the most endearing virtues of this beloved member, congratulating him on his successes, thanking him for the "strong leadership he showed in governing the Society, which has so much helped its progress".

He died on 1 April 1855, in Paris, aged 66. His wife, Anne-Henriette, passed away two years later, on 17 June 1857, also in Paris, aged 60. Jules Gossin's body was buried in the Picpus cemetery, and will be visited by the Board of the Council General in September⁶⁷. 

7. Farewell

It has been a huge honour and a great responsibility to hold the distinguished position as International President General, the first Brazilian to do so in the almost 200 years of the SSVP's history. With God's grace, we have overcome many adversities⁶⁸, especially the wickedness of the Evil One, and the generally unjust critics. My family was essential to me in the most difficult times. The motto I chose for this term of office⁶⁹ was a source of great strength to me, so that I never became vain. Envy, vanity, ego and individualism are plagues which have to be rejected, especially in the Church.

I am much better prepared for this mission today, than when I began in 2016. One day, I was asked: how do you want to be remembered in 50, 100, 200 years' time? Forgive my lack of modesty, but I want to be remembered as a human President General, close to people, with no masks or labels, pro-active. During our management, we gave priority to Ozanam's canonisation, to good governance, to the legacy of the seven founders, to young people, to the role of women in the SSVP, to training and communications. Today, Council General is better prepared, with a new head office in Paris, to face the challenges of the future. I feel happy, and I have a sense of success⁷⁰.

As President General of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, I have had countless experiences which I try to share actively with those around me. I also try, through audio recordings, talks and photographs, to share the incredible times lived during the missionary and official journeys I have made all over the world, taking the message of unity, charity and service to all corners of our Confederation.

money, they could buy more bread for the poor, "as well as enjoying better health". This type of advice shows that not only was he a President General who guided the progress of the young organisation, but he was also a devoted father figure for the young people he led.

⁶⁶ During the years Gossin held the post, Councils increased from 5 to 26, and Conferences from 144 to 369. The Society celebrated 94 Conferences abroad, two in America: one of these in Mexico, another in Quebec.

⁶⁷ My thanks to the writers Ralph Middlecamp and Matthieu Brejon for information about Jules Gossin.

⁶⁸ "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor 12, 10)

⁶⁹ Mark 9, 35: "Anyone who wants to be first, must be the very last of all and servant of all".

⁷⁰ 1 Tim 6, 12.



During these seven years as President General, I have gathered countless stories and wonderful events, many of them still unknown to the majority of our members. One unforgettable moment was when I visited the home of a poor woman in New York (USA), who after our prayers, gave thanks for the presence of the Conference in her life, and began to cry, because for more than 10 years, she said, she had not spoken to God. I cannot help mentioning the hand of God, acting at the time of buying the new international head office, which took place only six months before the health crisis, and probably could not have happened during the pandemic.

For all this, I consider myself hugely privileged and blessed by God. The Lord Jesus accompanies me throughout my life, in both joyful times and in the difficult times. The good God protects me every day, washes away my flaws, corrects my mistakes, calms my heart, reduces my anxiety, cares for my family, and makes our plans for life prosper. So I always ask the same thing: pray for me, that I may continue in this fine mission as President General for you all.

I also ask prayers from now on for the 17th International President General who will take up their role on 9 September 2023. To my successor, whoever it may be, I promise I will be a loyal and discreet servant, always available when called upon for any task. I urge my successor to remember that our best response to critics is forgiveness, service, love and goodness, giving to God all the difficulties we experience. Only thus will we gain the Paradise which we so long to reach some day.

I wish to express my deep gratitude to the Board of the Council General, who have helped me govern the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in the past seven years. As well as the Board, some 100 members belong to the various departments, committees, vice-presidencies, working groups or missions of the Council General. And at our head office, located in Paris, we rely on our well-prepared and experienced members of staff. For Father Andrés Motto, our beloved spiritual adviser, I have no words to thank him for the advice he has given us. I also have to express my special thanks to all the territories forming our Confederation. Without the support of the Superior Councils, it would be impossible to be a good President General. A warm embrace to everyone, and see you soon! 🌍

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

