Confédération Internationale de la
Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul

Le Président

CIRCULAR LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT GENERAL

Paris, January 31, 2025

Praise be to our Lord Jesus Christ!

My dear fellow members, aspirants, employees of our offices and social works, dear collaborators and volunteers:

Presentation:

As we close out 2024, we are beginning to lay the foundations for the presidential program, and this is a shared task. The main sign of the bond that unites us is friendship. In the Conferences, friendship comes first. Blessed Frederic expresses it beautifully: *"The strongest bond, the principle of true friendship, is charity. Charity cannot exist in the heart without extending outward. When we visit the homes of the poor, it's less about helping them and more about helping ourselves—it makes us better and strengthens our friendships."*

At this point, I ask for your commitment to better our Society. We must be encouraged and avoid complaining about feeling old, tired, overwhelmed, or lacking resources. We are "useless servants," and only by God's grace can we face this service with hope. It is through His love and our example of mutual care that our Christian commitment will shine. Through this, we will inspire and foster healthy growth in our Conferences. With God, we can do anything!

We are together as a single Conference that extends throughout the world, to strengthen the advances in the areas of formation, youth, communication, governance, institutional relations, and other strategic aspects that we are implementing from the General Council. Because **the Society of St. Vincent de Paul belongs to all of us, it is an institution that leaves a lasting impact on our lives, shaping us into a community with a shared identity—an identity rooted in the Love of Christ.**

We begin 2025 as a Jubilee Year proclaimed by Pope Francis, under the motto "Pilgrims of Hope" This year is meant to be a year of hope, where we can each contribute, in our own way, to ending wars, alleviating the ongoing effects of the pandemic, and addressing the suffering caused by climate change. The Jubilee Year began on December 24, 2024, and will run until January 6, 2026. It offers us a unique opportunity to embrace God's mercy and experience a time of spiritual renewal and grace.

Our social action

For us, members of the Conferences, social progress cannot be based on the mere attainment of material objectives, because we understand that what really makes a society great is when the person progresses from the spiritual point of view, only **the improvement of human quality can truly be called progress.**

The response of the Social Doctrine of the Church is to seek the integral human development of the person in the light of the message of Jesus Christ, who reveals to us that God is Love. Frederic Ozanam and his

friends teach us that true social action is not just about providing material help. Their personal commitment, carried out in community—in the Conference—and out of love for God, goes much deeper. It is about improving our neighbors, but equally important, it is about improving ourselves, because this is the best way to be the engine of progress for the whole society. This is the most faithful origin of the Conferences.

We recall that the Conferences were born with a **sense of friendship, of universal community,** because it is in community that we are perfected, and this is how we have continued for 191 years, faithful to this spirit of our founders, even though it is easy to fall into the temptation of mere assistance, when this is precisely the option we wish to eradicate.

I have in my hand a Memoir of the Conferences of the Real Sitio y Villa de Aranjuez, a town near Madrid where I spent some years. It is a very old Memoir from 1921, sent to me by a friend who had it saved from his grandfather, and it begins as follows: "*Of our Society in Aranjuez, its existence is known, but not its essence. Most people believe that it is an association dedicated to charity and especially to corporal charity, an institution that distributes alms among the needy, but they ignore its fundamental objective, that of serving as a spiritual exercise for the members to reach moral perfection by practicing the virtues****. Relief is a pretext to enter the house of the needy and speak to them of God."***

Written in the purest essence of Frederic Ozanam: *"charity must be a means, not the end of our association which is rather to spread the spirit of Christianity, which is the spirit of Love".*

Our commitment to inner transformation

As your greatest servant in this position that you have appointed me, I ask myself how do we live our Vincentian commitment day by day. I wonder if we feel the sensation **of a "new person" when we exercise the vocation to follow Christ and serve him in the needy**, or if we have lost the tension and without wanting to, we sometimes act out of habit. We know that it is only through grace that we can fulfill our vocation with joy and fullness and that only, as Ozanam points out, *"by preserving our faith, we can communicate it to others through the channels of charity".*

In the time of the first Christians, when someone encountered Christ, they said that he had experienced a profound metanoia, as a sign of divine revelation, of transformation, of a change of mind. This change is what enlightens us in the face of our indecision, what makes us develop, what allows us to experience and know better our capacities, it is the driving force of our dynamism, of our Vincentian vocation. It is to **discover the surprise of what we are capable of loving and doing,** for the greater glory of God.

St. Vincent, St. Louise, and Blessed Frederic Ozanam strongly experienced this metanoia. Frederic warns that it is the simple will that sets us on the way, the echo of his words resounds today, with the same force

with which he urged the young founders of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul: *"**Each of us carries in his heart a seed of holiness** that the simple will is enough to make it bear fruit".*

Teaching the Truth from the faith

When they speak to us of destitution in our Vincentian mission, we understand it as the lack of means for material subsistence and we try to find the greatest remedy, but there is another destitution that is much greater, which is our lack of knowledge before the magnitude of creation, before the mystery of God. God teaches us from Genesis when he forbids us to eat from the tree of good and evil, that we should not crave for certainty, that we should seek the truth only by faith, but our intelligence wants certainty, wants to demonstrate, wants to control what it understands to be good or evil.

For St. Vincent, humility is *"the virtue of service, and the virtue of Jesus Christ".* **We do not need great wisdom to build the Kingdom,** perhaps it is to avoid falling into our arrogance.

In our evangelical mission as Vincentians, when I want to assist spiritually, I sometimes feel powerless before the skeptics because I cannot respond convincingly in a rational way, but I have learned that, in the essence of faith, there is a combination of not knowing and not needing to know, that **faith is another type of certainty that I can best announce by giving testimony of God's Love.**

Ampère, the universal scientific savant, said to Ozanam: *"How great is God, dear Frederic, how great is God! We know nothing!".*

From the biography of F. Ozanam by K. O'Meara and speaking of our principal founder: *"His faith was solid and fervent, but not without periods of discouragement and emotional collapse, which are consistent with the firmest intellectual conviction. One day he went out and entered the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mon t where there was a group of humble devotees, mainly women and children; kneeling in their midst, he saw Mr. Ampère. This picture and the lesson it conveyed were engraved with fire in the young man's heart; weeping, he knelt down, repentant for having harbored disloyalty, even if only in the slightest, to that faith before whose mystery his great and venerable master was kneeling in humble adoration."*

The Vincentian community as a path to holiness:

The Vincentian vocation arises as a response that wants to transform one's own life. There are many people who are eager for this change to take place in their lives.

But the new vocations of those who wish to join us must be protected, we must create a community atmosphere where healthy fraternity is breathed among us, where holiness is sought, where the foundation stone is maintained. **The Conference meetings or celebrations should be that fraternal feast that we never want to miss.** The Conferences need now more than ever people who know how to transmit joy, spirit of authenticity, spirit of that foundation stone: They need people who live the charism and know how to infect it; servants of Christ who really excite and enthuse, because we have to know how to transmit well the Gospel and our Vincentian charism to the people who approach us.

Today, in most of the developed countries, we have moved from a cultural Christianity to a more authentic one, with fewer faithful, but more dedicated and profound, which is why it needs holier people, who radiate

us, who following the example of those who are already on the altars, truly believe that we can transform the world.

Frederic Ozanam, our principal founder exhorted us: *"**Who would dare to predict the results we could obtain if we had a more sincere piety,** if we were not so inferior to our vocation...? We could sanctify the world. But, alas, we could, if we were saints!"*

Presidential program:

Growing together in faith: In order for this Vincentian mission to give greater meaning to our lives, which is ultimately what we seek in the Conferences, a spiritual program has already been implemented by the spiritual advisor, Father José Francisco Orozco, CM,. We know that ongoing Vincentian formation is of fundamental importance in the life of the Conferences.

-Formation Plan: The framework of the Formation Plan "Growing Together in Faith" seeks to continue to foster in us members the **personal search for God and His Kingdom**, through a personal relationship with Christ and service to the poor.

Practical catechetical reflection sheets on the core themes of this formation plan will appear on the international website every two months, so that they can be used and worked on by those Conferences that so desire.

- Finding Christ in the poor
- Raise awareness of the different types of poverty
- Called to holiness
- Pastoral conversion
- Ozanam and systemic change
- A Christian dystopia for a world without hope?
- A look at the past, present and future of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- Modern Challenges to Vincentian Charity
- The Social Doctrine of the Church, a seed of hope for the future

By addressing these key themes, "Growing Together in Faith" aims to empower SSVP members to deepen their faith, live as committed disciples of Jesus Christ and contribute to building the Kingdom of God on earth.

On a monthly basis, short reflections inviting personal and community prayer will appear on the international website.

It is a broad program, open to the participation of all, which we hope will be fruitful.

In addition, I would like to briefly highlight the progress of the strategic priorities of this presidential term. The full program, with more details, can be found on our corporate website. These priorities are rooted in our Rule, which is the foundation of our unity and friendship:

- International Vincentian Day. The purpose is to make our institution and its social action better known. This year, coinciding with the International Formation Day, the presentation of the International Report 2023 was held in Madrid (Spain) last November 29, under the slogan "Your embrace renews the world", because **our embrace wants to be a gesture that strengthens, that dignifies and accompanies, that transmits affection and trust.** We want to make clear what we do every day, fulfilling the need for accompaniment, care, close and personal treatment.

The day ended with a solemn Eucharist and the communal proclamation of the Vincentian Promise in the Church of San Antonio de los Alemanes in Madrid, a jewel of Baroque art founded by King Philip III in the early seventeenth century. The event included a performance by the children's choir of the Colegio San Alfonso "Santiago de Masarnau", musician and composer, founder of the Conferences in Spain in 1849.

- Support for international twinning and solidarity projects. To this end, in addition to the mission entrusted to the Development Aid Commission and the Solidarity Fund (CIAD and FIS), we are studying various concrete cooperation projects that are in line with the encyclical Laudato Si', in order to obtain resources and with the support of our Conferences and Councils. We want to **encourage twinning and contribute to alleviating the dramatic consequences of environmental degradation** in the lives of the world's poorest people. The Twinning Commission continues to work on a strategic plan for the future, with two main objectives: to continue to promote the proper use of the Twinning manual and to find more donor countries.

- Youth presence in local and international events and activities. In the Jubilee Year 2025 we have among others, two major events for young Vincentians in Rome: One, the Jubilee Youth Day convened by Pope Francis, to be held in Rome from July 28 to August 3, where **Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, patron of the SSVP youth, will be canonized**, and the second during the same dates, the III International Youth Meeting of the SSVP, where international youth delegates representing the youth of the 155 countries will be convened. About 150 young people are expected to attend, at least one per country.

For these meetings and to forge the future of the SSVP**, I appeal to the countries that want to collaborate and can provide resources to cover the costs** of their youth delegates, or to sponsor young people from countries with fewer resources. To do so, please contact the staff of the international headquarters in Paris.

- Annual Report of the International Council General. In order to demonstrate the global impact that the SSVP represents in the world, to increase its credibility and request more aid, the Annual Report 2023 was presented to the media and attendees in general, with the consolidated figures of the Confederation, highlighting the impact of more than 2,500 social projects in 155 countries and five continents, with an overall figure for social action of € 1,490,000,000,000. The event, which was attended by Her Royal Highness

the Infanta Elena de Borbón y Grecia, highlighted the 191 years of history of our institution and its capacity to transform lives.

Speakers at the event included Vice President General Ralph Middlecamp, who explained our activities on the American continent, Assistant Vice President General Elaine Heyworth, who spoke about our activities in Europe, and International Territorial Vice President Maurice Yeung, who spoke about our programs on the Asian continent. The Assistant Vice-President General Urbanus Kinuthia also took part, explaining the initiatives on the African continent, and the Territorial Delegate for Formation, Patrick Wallis, spoke about our work in Oceania.

With regard to emergencies, we highlight our crucial role in responding to natural disasters and conflicts, providing food, medicine and shelter in affected countries. In addition, our organization has led reconstruction projects and provided emotional and spiritual support for victims, demonstrating its commitment in the most critical moments.

Finally, the President General commented that the Annual Report is a reflection of our commitment to accountability, although he indicated that *"what is most valuable and* ***cannot be counted is the loving, personal and close attention we give to those in need in order to promote their integral human development****, faithful to the Christian spirit of our founders.*

A copy of the Social Report 2023, for any presentation or need for Councils and Conferences, is available on the corporate website.

- New creative forms of financing. In order for the Councils and Conferences to address the changing types of poverty we face in our countries, as well as to seek and raise resources to finance these initiatives, the Council General has created a commission **to launch an International Foundation,** whose preliminary work consists of studying its structure, mission and objectives**.** The decisions will be ready by the first half of 2025. The commission is part of the team that forms the International Commission for Aid to Development (CIAD).

- Governance, transparency, and unity of the SSVP. The Vice-Presidency for Structure is working with her team to improve the formation regarding the International Statutes and Rule, and the Vice-President for Formation is also working with her team to plan the formation of the Presidents of the National Councils.

In addition, the new International Audit, Finance and Risk Committee has broadened its scope and is composed of five people for a five-year term.

Other issues of interest for 2025

a.- *Communication:* As in the previous year, I would like to comment that the exchange of communication, the participation in giving the best of ourselves, is what forms a more integral community. That is why I ask for your participation, contributing initiatives, sending chronicles, photos, and news of all that you do to International Communication, to awaken consciences with our example, and to make us stand out as messengers of the word of God. We would like to thank all those who have already collaborated, because we have improved a lot in this aspect. We are going to reinforce the team and **improve the website to**

make it more visual and less technical, so that it will be a more precise tool to promote international cooperation and twinning.

b.- *Regarding awareness of the negative impact of climate change:* In addition to maintaining our status in ECOSOC, the SSVP is considering becoming an Observer to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

c.*-Aggregation* ***System****.* I would like to inform you that a new online system is being introduced to improve and validate aggregations faster and that there will no longer be paper forms.

d.*-International* ***Events****:* In addition to the meetings of the Board and the Territorial Vice Presidents, in 2025 the III SSVP Youth Meeting is planned in Rome during the Jubilee, from July 28 to August 3. A plenary meeting is planned in South Africa from June 5 to 8, and the Ibero-American meeting is scheduled in Panama from October 30 to November 2.

Requests and Acknowledgments:

Remembrance: First of all, I ask for a **prayer in fraternal remembrance of our confreres Jerome Perrin, Secretary General, Clement Venter, Delegate for International Formation, and Jean Denis Likonya, National President of the D.R. Congo, recently deceased**, who are now in the presence of the Lord and guiding us from the other shore**.** Also, for all the Vincentians who died this past year, who were an example for many of us on the path of faith. We will continue to go forward, bringing the love of God to others as a tribute to them and for the glory of Our Lord.

Acknowledgements: Finally, I would like to **thank on behalf of the General Council, the fellow members who for various reasons leave their responsibility in the CGI structure in specific areas,** although we know that because of their experience and love for the SSVP, we can always count on their valuable knowledge. I especially want to thank Renato Lima de Oliveira, former PGI, as commissioner at the UN and Adela Redondo as delegate for International Communication. Thanks to all of them for their generous commitment and dedication and for all the positive things they have brought us. We would also like to thank the new members who are joining the structure and who have accepted the position of service, as well as all the members and volunteers in general, for their selfless work, always recognized in the eyes of God.

On behalf of the General Council, I would also like to thank all the employees, benefactors, and friends of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for their support for a more socially just society. Thanks to the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity and all the branches of the Vincentian Family with whom we collaborate to strive to make the world a better place, in the spirit of the teachings of St. Vincent de Paul, our patron saint.

I would also like to make a **special mention of gratitude to the spouses and relatives of the members from all over the world, who patiently put up with the absences** and sometimes also suffer changes in family plans due to a service assignment.

Confédération Internationale de la
Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul

Le Président

Farewell

In this year 2025 that is beginning, I implore the Miraculous Virgin to protect the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Vincentian Family, us, our families, and the people we welcome in need.

Receive from your servant and president, a fraternal embrace in St. Vincent and Blessed Frederic Ozanam, with the sincere wish that the friendship and Vincentian values that unite us continue to grow stronger every day, inspiring us to continue walking together in the spirit of service and commitment that we have set out to renew the world.

Juan Manuel B. Gomez
XVII President General