



Paris, January 31th 2017

CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY BELOVED BROTHERS  
AND SISTERS, MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY OF SAINT  
VINCENT DE PAUL, CONFERENCES AROUND THE  
WORLD

# 1. Introduction

Praise be to our Lord Jesus Christ !

My dear brothers and sisters, beloved new members, employees of our centers and projects, esteemed collaborators and volunteers.

As you know, on September 9, 2016, in Paris, France, I had the joy of being inducted as the 16th General President of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. This brought an enormous responsibility, and at the same time an immense privilege for me and for the new members of the International Board, given the huge challenges facing us until the end of our term in 2022.

Thus, it is with great joy that I have the pleasure of reinstating the annual Circular Letters<sup>1</sup>, based on Vincentian tradition and on the good practices of the unforgettable and enlightened General Presidents who preceded me. This is the first time in the history of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul that the General President's Circular Letter is being published in Arabic, Italian, and Chinese, in addition to our organization's official languages.

Although we are living in an age in which technology, modernity, visual media and social media dominate communication, this traditional method of information (the letter) is still one of the most efficient ways to interact with the brothers and sisters of all the Vincentian Conferences around the world, sharing the reflections of your General President, informing you about what is happening in the International General Council, encouraging you with ideas about the main topics of discussion, and bringing a message of unity to the entire Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

This General President hopes that the Circular Letter may be read and considered in the meetings of the Conferences and the Councils, at all the levels of our society.

## 2. Agenda of the General Council

In 2015, during the opening of the electoral process,

<sup>1</sup> The first Circular Letter was written by Emmanuel Joseph Bailly on July 14, 1841. In this letter, the General Council gave numerous recommendations about adherence to the Rule, the organization and hierarchy of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, visits to the Poor, and cordial relations with other charitable organizations.

I presented my working platform for review by the Superior or National Councils, so that they could analyze the principles it contained. This set of ideas was accepted in the elections held on June 5, 2016, in Rome. The work plan contains 20 items and is available on social networks and on the website of the International General Council ([www.ssvpglobal.org](http://www.ssvpglobal.org)).

I recommend reading the 20 topics of our work plan, which will certainly be considered in the Strategic Plan during our term of office. I also request your prayers for the success of these initiatives.

I consider them all very important, starting with the first one, about the Vincentian spiritual life. It is the search for holiness, through works of mercy and charity, founded on prayer, that should be the focus of our Vincentian activity. We should not lose time with secondary aspects that may create division<sup>2</sup> and that separate us from the essence of our association, from the foundation of the first Charity Conference. Only in this way can we build a better world, which is more equal and more Christian.

Holiness is the goal of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and we can never lose sight of it. Our activity cannot be reduced to mere material assistance, nor to activism that lacks criteria and goals. From this conviction arises the need and urgency to find, in our Vincentian spirituality, the foundation and the impulse of everything that we should do with and for<sup>3</sup> the People in need (Psalm 112).

One of the proposed innovations in our work program is the creation of the office of the General Ombudsman, which will receive praise, comments, suggestions, criticisms, observations, and reports regarding the Vincentian work performed by the International General Council. All the information given to the Ombudsman will be treated in confidence. I believe that the creation of this service can encourage the establishment of similar ombudsmen in the Superior or National Councils, increasing transparency among the Vincentian groups and allowing the members to directly influence and help the administration of the

<sup>2</sup> This theme has always been a focus of the SSVp presidents and general secretaries. In the preamble to the Rule, in December of 1835, the theme was also addressed, but in Emmanuel Bailly's Circular Letter of December 1, 1842, the recommendation was explicit: "Therefore, let us not allow the spirit of argument to penetrate our Conferences."

<sup>3</sup> Writing to one of his missionaries, Saint Vincent de Paul said, "Our Lord can do nothing with our knowledge and good works, if our heart does not belong to Him" (SV VII, 467). As Vincentians, our holiness is defined by giving our hearts to God to perform His work of love with the Poor, serving them, witnessing to them, and letting ourselves be witnessed to by them.

Councils and the SSVP Works. The Ombudsman will use the e-mail [cgi.og@ssvpglobal.org](mailto:cgi.og@ssvpglobal.org), and will also perform mediation work when necessary.

Another new aspect is the launch of the “SSVP PLUS” Project, which will energize the internationalization process<sup>4</sup> of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Today, there are 207 countries in the world, and SSVP is present in 151 of them. There is still, therefore, a vast and unexplored field, encouraging us to promote the growth of the Vincentian charisma in the various countries on all five continents, even in Muslim-majority nations. In partnership with the Superior or National Councils, under the leadership of the International Territorial Vice-presidents, we will develop this project, applying achievable annual targets. We will unite so that we can take the message of Frédéric Ozanam, Bailly, and the other founders to the entire planet.

In the area of communication, we hope to do a live transmission of the annual meetings of the General Council, which are held in June, and implement a system of videoconferencing for the regular meetings of the board and in the areas of training and youth. We want to energize the communications sector with the development of an annual institutional magazine, production of new videos, and the establishment of more modern strategies for interaction with Society members and others. We will also intensify the use of social media and apps. As everyone knows, the General President is a journalist, so you can expect some advances in this area within the next few years.

It is very important – and has become a necessity in the present time – that all the Councils and Conferences seek strategic and institutional alliances.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the International General Council can form cooperation agreements and partnerships with renowned institutions in the humanitarian and social spheres. These agreements will be very positive for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and will enable us to take emergency action in tragedies and natural disasters. We hope that these partnerships with other charitable organizations can also help us bring the message of Our Lord Jesus Christ to many people who do not yet know Him.

<sup>4</sup> In the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Manual, dated September of 1845, the growth of the SSVP was extensively discussed, as the founders wanted the association to grow without losing the “original spirit.”

<sup>5</sup> Chapters 6 and 7 of the the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul International Confederation Rule.

Finally, the most important thing of all is to implement these innovations without increasing the Council's overall budget. I believe that the countries already make sufficient financial contributions to keep our organization functioning well on a global level. Thus, we will find creative ways of working<sup>6</sup> so that the resources can be used appropriately to benefit our organization and People in need. All this effort will only be valid and efficient if done to improve the work of the SSVP with the People in need whom we serve.

### 3. Recommendations to the Vincentians

I joined the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in 1986, and I have been serving the International General Council for 10 years in different roles. During this time, I was able to make dozens of visits to various countries, and thus to understand the reality of the SSVP in many parts of the world a little better. Based on these observations, I am going to make a few comments regarding the work of the Conferences, the support for the SSVP Works, and the coordinating actions of the Councils. These observations are made in a spirit of warm affection, without judgement. I make them with the intention of reversing certain tendencies, avoiding problems,<sup>7</sup> and proposing a more effective form of activity.

In Vincentian daily life, it is important to note that the success of a Conference's initiatives basically resides in the climate of friendship, prayer, and cooperation among the brothers and sisters<sup>8</sup>. The more harmonious and cordial the Conference meetings are, the more energized and prepared the Vincentians will be in their charitable and social activities. This is the role of the president and the officers of the Conference: ensure that the Vincentian atmosphere is always positive, forward-looking, and geared towards truly resolving the problems of the people whom we help. For this, the “internal climate” (in the environment of the Conferences, Councils, and Works) should be in harmony with the “external action” of our organization (with the families and others who we help). We should have, among ourselves, the same affection and love

<sup>6</sup> It is fitting to remember the statement of Saint Vincent de Paul about the sacrament of the Eucharist: “Love is infinitely inventive” (SV XI, 145).

<sup>7</sup> See: “Preliminary considerations and clarifying notes for the Rule” (December 1835).

<sup>8</sup> Regarding this topic, we recommend reading the Circular Letter from June 30, 2001, written by the 14th General President, José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha y Díaz.

that we dedicate to the People in need whom we help<sup>9</sup>. And we should not forget to listen to older Vincentians, since they have the experience and wisdom necessary to help conduct the Conference's works.

Another observation to be made relates to the internal management of the Councils, on all levels. As the Rule establishes<sup>10</sup>, the Conferences are the most important Vincentian unit and the Councils serve them. But in some parts of the world, there is an improper and unacceptable inversion of this principle, in which we perceive that the Conferences

gravitate around the Councils, which become more important. The Councils exist not only to develop the Conferences and ensure the Rule is followed properly, but above all to provide services and support the projects that originate in the Conferences. In return, so that this can happen as it should, the Conferences conscientiously make their financial contributions to strengthen the Councils and thus fulfill their organizational role prescribed in the Rule.

We also cannot help noting that many Conferences and Councils have saved an excessive amount of money earmarked for future use. However, the ideal is for the resources to be applied immediately, with prudence, responsibility, and efficiency, and not accumulated. Stashing away resources should be avoided, as this practice is not in line with Vincentian tradition. National and international fraternal help in the form of twinning also depends a great deal on the generous, open-handed solidarity of the Conferences and Councils. If the Vincentian groups accumulate and retain their financial resources, it will be very difficult to share charity with other parts of the world. We must not forget that the assets of our Society are the 'patrimony' of those in need, as we learn from Saint Vincent de Paul<sup>11</sup>. And the resources we collect or receive should be directed primarily to People in need. Also for this reason, the management of all that we have must always be judicious and transparent, as our founders taught us.

Regarding the elections at various levels of the SSVP structure, we have noticed that some candidates have objected to the result of the election, rejecting the

<sup>9</sup> For more details about this topic, we recommend reading the article "The two networks of charity," written by the General President, in the book "Vincentian Chronicles IV."

<sup>10</sup> SSVP International Confederation Rule, article 3.6 ("On the Councils").

<sup>11</sup> Saint Vincent de Paul left us with this sharp statement: "We live on the patrimony of Jesus Christ, and the sweat of the Poor." (SV XI, 201).

democratic desire of the majority or questioning the rules. Of course it is possible for there to be flaws in these electoral processes, which should be reviewed by the hierarchically superior Councils, as well as improved through the transparency mechanisms that we are presently implementing, such as the General Ombudsman. However, without mentioning names, we need to see more flexible and tolerant Vincentians<sup>12</sup>, who accept the result of the vote, able to congratulate the victors humbly and promise them the necessary support to guide the aims of the SSVP in each area. The General Council commends all Vincentians who have made themselves available for election, because without them it would not be possible to encourage the continual renewal of our organization.

In the first Circular Letter of this term of office, I could not fail to mention the fundamental theme of home visits to families in need, which is the core activity of the Vincentian Conferences. Rosalie Rendu taught the founders the right way to meet with the families in need<sup>13</sup> and encouraged these visits in an evangelical spirit; they should be the opportunity for the Vincentians to become friends of People in need, involving themselves in their unfortunate circumstances, sympathizing with the personal dramas<sup>14</sup> of each one, with an affectionate and transformative attitude. This spirit should prevail in our Vincentian visits, alleviating every form of poverty we meet in the exercise of our missionary service.

Being part of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul should be a voluntary, spontaneous, and true commitment without ulterior motives<sup>15</sup>. The most important thing in this vocational ministry is serving People in need. Regarding those in need, there should be no divergences among us. If the focus of Vincentian work is truly on the person in need, we will be certain of being on the right path and we will avoid a lot of disillusionment, disappointments, and

<sup>12</sup> Regarding this topic, I suggest reading the part entitled "Qualities the President must have," in the Circular Letter of March 1, 1844, written by the first General President, Emmanuel Joseph Bailly.

<sup>13</sup> See the letter of the Blessed Antônio Frédéric Ozanam, of February 9, 1837, sent to the General Council of Paris, describing the expansion of the Vincentian Conferences in Lyon and surrounding areas. In this letter, Ozanam writes, "Visiting the Poor at home has been our main work." Emmanuel Joseph Bailly, in the Circular Letter of July 14, 1841, reinforces this principle: "Never forget to visit the Poor in their homes."

<sup>14</sup> On this theme, we highlight the Circular Letter by François Lallier of August 1837, in which he says, "It is gratifying to listen to the Poor and demonstrate interest regarding their woes and domestic problems."

<sup>15</sup> Regarding this theme, in the Circular Letter of July 14, 1841, Bailly asserts: "Nothing is imposed on us, everything is voluntarily accepted, because among us, charity exists above all. Charity is what is strong enough to unite men and bring them to the path of good."

frustrations in our Vincentian path. Truly, there is no problem with us having different opinions from each other, but these should be humbly restricted to the form our service should take. Disillusionment and disappointments are also inevitable<sup>16</sup>, but they should be treated with mercy and offered to God as a sacrifice for the needy people whom we want to serve and encourage. Thus, we must center ourselves on that which is truly of interest: charity, prayer, generous love of People in need, collaboration with the mission of the Church, the seeking of our sanctification and the transformation of the world.<sup>17</sup>

We also need to avoid certain problems in the relationships which the SSVP might have with the Church, with other entities, and even in the heart of the Vincentian Family. The leaders of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul should be people who are open to dialogue, understanding, resilient and willing to reach consensus, as Vincentian tradition recommends<sup>18</sup>. A large part of these types of problem experienced in some countries lies in failure to follow the Rule, in the reluctance of some to concede, and in the difficulty of letting go of one's own opinion on behalf of something greater and achieving reconciliation. Therefore, without taking sides, the General President urges all the leaders to perform their roles with empathy, humility, and charity, being far from human vanity<sup>19</sup>, which will greatly help improve organizational relationships with the external world. Finally, it is essential to mention that in some parts

16 In the Circular Letter of December 1, 1842, Bailly states, "We exist to unite, not to divide. To be successful in our charitable work, it is necessary to suffer and persevere. Greatness is only achieved through humility."

17 We can consider the impressive words that the Blessed Antoine Frédéric Ozanam addressed to the SSVP General Assembly on December 14, 1848: "We are convinced that the science of the charitable reforms is not learned in books, nor in the tribunes of public assemblies, but instead in being beside the poor, sitting at their bedsides, suffering the cold that they suffer, and bringing out the secrets of their sorrowing souls with the outpouring of a friendly conversation. When people are dedicated to this ministry - not for a few months, but over the years - then they may begin to understand the fundamental elements of this problem called misery. Then they have the right to propose serious measures, which instead of scaring people, serve as comfort and hope."

18 In the Circular Letter of the International General Council, dated June 11, 1844, Antoine Frédéric Ozanam and two other leaders - Leon Cornudet and Louis de Baudicour - list a series of qualities necessary to be president of the Council, including: great holiness, serving as an example, great respect and virtues, habit of giving, spirit of fraternity, prudence, and simplicity. In Bailly's Circular Letter dated March 1, 1844, the General President asks that the leaders have "talent, holiness, and Christian prudence."

19 In various Circular Letters, the general presidents have addressed the issue of vanity, quite rightly, as well as other weeds such as envy and ingratitude.

of the world, some Conferences find themselves excessively dependent on international financial help, making those Vincentians complacent. These donations coming from abroad are important, but it is necessary to make it clear that the Conference members should work to raise the resources on a local level, so that the charity can be performed immediately, not just through the contributions coming from other countries. The Conference and its members are directly involved in dealing with the suffering of the people whom we help.

## 4. 2017 – Year Dedicated to Bailly

I'll take this opportunity to announce that 2017 is the "Year Dedicated to Bailly." We intend to encourage study of the biography and work of this memorable man, who created the appropriate conditions for those young French people to organize and create the "Charity Conferences" in 1833.

Emmanuel Joseph Bailly was the first General President of the SSVP, and his life was entirely dedicated to the work of charity. It is worth learning about Bailly's story in detail. For example, it is important to stress Bailly's gifts of reconciliation. The first Conference consisted of young men from different backgrounds: some were lawyers, others doctors; some were Republicans, and others monarchists; some were liberal, others conservative. But Bailly was able to lead them all in the same vocation and the same path, and for example, masterfully managed to guide the process of dissolving the Saint Sulpice Conference (the "Mother Conference"), avoiding division and dispersion of those young people, among so many other important contributions he made throughout his Vincentian life. We truly have a lot to learn from Emmanuel Bailly!

For this reason, we are opening an international essay-writing competition for unpublished texts of up to 20 pages. The competition rules will be made available on the CGI site within the upcoming weeks. Monetary awards will be given, both to the winning authors and the Conferences in which they work. We are certain that the academic works about Bailly will be deeply rich, revealing curiosities and details about the life of this man who was full of wisdom and charity. Thus, at the end of the competition, we can share this knowledge with all the Vincentians of the world. We are sure that it will be a great success, and that the Superior Councils will help the CGI spread this initiative, encouraging everyone to participate.

This contest will be repeated every year until 2022,

involving all the founders except for Ozanam, who is already the subject of a large body of literature. At the beginning of each year, and in the upcoming Circular Letters of our term, we will announce a different founder for each of the themed years. This initiative is one way for the International General Council to value the role of all the founders, who together received divine inspiration for founding<sup>20</sup>the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Among the seven original founders, the Blessed Frédéric Ozanam is the one about whom we have the most historical and biographical information. This is why we must give the same recognition and spotlight to the other founders, since without them we would not be here today, nor would we exist as a society.

## 5. Conclusion

Dear Vincentians,

I never thought I would be elected international General President of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. That 16-year-old who joined the Saint Thomas of Aquinas Conference in the city of Campinas, São Paulo (Brazil) 30 years ago, just wanted to visit needy families and perhaps help those experiencing difficulties in life. But Divine Providence wanted this, and the Holy Spirit chose me to be the servant-leader of the entire SSVP. This is why I very much need the prayers and support of all the Vincentians throughout the world.

I ask you to pray for me and for the leaders who occupy roles in the various entities, departments, commissions, and advisory bodies of the International General Council, in addition to the employees of the headquarters in Paris, asking God for the knowledge necessary to guide the future of our organization well. We all have flaws and we may make erroneous decisions. However, we are not afraid to recognize the mistakes we may make. One thing I can assure you: we will spare no effort to do our best for the General Council, for the structure of the SSVP, and for the more than 30 million people we help around the world.

In 2017, we will commemorate 400 years of Vincentian charisma and the foundation of the International Charities Association (AIC). I ask all the Conferences and Councils to dedicate themselves effectively to the activities coordinated by the Vincentian Family in their regions, participating in the shared events and projects, in collaboration with

<sup>20</sup> On January 30, 1853, when participating in the establishment of a Vincentian Conference in Florence, Italy, Ozanam stated, "We cannot consider ourselves the founders, because it was God's will and He founded our Society Himself."

the different Vincentian branches. Savor the spiritual readings that will be suggested by the Vincentian Family throughout this year, since they will highlight the origins of our shared charisma. It is always good to revisit occasionally the concepts, values, and principles generated by the charisma, reevaluating the quality of our action for the present times.

We are an international Catholic lay association, a true "community of faith, prayer, and hope." This characteristic has been with us since the origins of our foundation in 1833, and for this reason we cannot lose this quality, which is part of our identity and mission. This year, we also celebrate 20 years since the beatification of Ozanam, and it is always good to meditate and remember our foundational lay origins.

I thank with all my heart the Vincentians who accepted my invitation to be part of the board of the International General Council. Thank you for your availability, commitment, and complete devotion to the structure of the SSVP. In the same way, I also commend all the Vincentians who have previously served in the General Council in other terms, in various roles. You helped raise the International General Council to the excellent standard it has today. May God shower blessings on you!

I know that many topics have not been addressed in this Circular Letter (training, youth, family, the elderly, and immigration), but I promise to address them in future editions. I would like to receive suggestions for themes for the upcoming years. I will be awaiting your comments and observations, which you can send to [cgi.circularletter@gmail.com](mailto:cgi.circularletter@gmail.com).

I leave you a message of hope and charity, based on evangelical virtues, desiring that humility be the mark of every Vincentian brother and sister, especially those who perform functions in the Councils and the Works: "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." (Mark 9:35b). This is also the slogan of our term.

Under the gentle gaze of Our Lady of Grace, with the blessings of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the illumination of the Divine Holy Spirit, I thank you all for your attention.

With love and affection, always serving in hope,

Renato LIMA DE OLIVEIRA  
16th General President

