

Paris / Madrid, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2001

## CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR FELLOW MEMBERS OF SAINT VINCENT'S CONFERENCES IN THE WORLD.

Dear friends and confreres,

The vocation of serving the poor, in the true community of prayer and action that each Conference should be, is not just restricted to the life of our own Vincentian group. Through the Paul's one, one of the probably eldest member of the conference, told us how by entering it, we came to belong to the fraternity of a great institution distinguished by the links of friendship and brotherhood among the fellow members and that spread over more than hundred and thirty countries, and to which hundreds of thousands of people belonged. Of men and women as anybody else: simple lay Christians, modest, workers that very often do not have any other means apart from the prayer and the generous dedication, person to person. Unselfish commitment from approaches solely human and deeply interested in sharing the distress of others. All together, as our dear old fellow member would tell us, we make up one of the most important Catholic Institutions in the world.

We should consider the importance acquired by the conferences in the Catholic universe more than as an honour, which on the other hand it is undoubtedly so, as an incentive that makes us pay heed to the needs of that Church of the poor we want to serve (1). In fact, being our sense of belonging to the Holy Church of the poor essential, we have to be clear about its meaning and how to live it. It could be useful to remember the following simple rules that our tradition has left to us:

- The Vincentians pray and meditate on God's word in the conference's Christian community, being their first concern (2) the active union, in love and friendship, with their fellow members.
- The Vincentians share the affliction and the need of the poor, individually and in community, aiming, with their prayer, work, imagination and dreams, to find ways of putting an end to their

suffering. Working actively in all the possible social fields, without forgetting first to relieve the human being that is suffering.

- Vincentians do not judge: they are always available (3).
- Vincentians are faithful to their baptismal pledges, specially in their commitment to the poor.
- Vincentians love deeply the Holy Church of Christ (4).
- Vincentians are constantly concerned about a training that would enable them to serve better Christ in the poor, the Christian community and the Holy Church (5).
- Vincentians are aware of their responsibility for spreading the Good News, and of their duty of doing it by teaching through the testimony of the very life. Being cheerful witnesses of hope (6) (7).
- Vincentians, enjoying and being the lords of the land where each was born, work and feel citizens of the world and brothers of the whole mankind (8).
- Vincentians encourage the work in common. They foster their common unity, with the result that they achieve their commitment to the poorest, working always in pairs of fellow members that collaborate closely linked (9).

All these requirements, summarized from our beloved tradition, should make us think about the meaning of our belonging to the conferences. In fact, we get too often stuck in a rut, in the conformity. In the calm of our weekly performance that, even if it does a lot of good to the people we meet, destroys the worry of constantly examining around us, the new causes of suffering that keep coming up. This kind of everyday conformity, that we observe in some of our conferences, ends up withering, ageing and making unattractive for the ones observing us from outside the Society, the very message that we are seriously obliged to convey. This flaw is often found basically in many of our conferences of the so-called first world, from which we also receive their lament for not having new fellow members. These dear

confreres have to wonder whether we take note of the overflowing needs that today interest the world where we work and which we want to serve (10). Do we use the right language? Do we use ways and means appropriate to our time? Probably, a calm perusal will make them change their way of working, of perceiving the reality and, wherewith, they will attain the concurrence of new fellow members.

One of the most serious duties of our groups is to think about the circumstances around the space and the time in which they are working (11). Hurry, the lack of a frequent exam of our activity, are maybe the main enemy in the life of the fellow members and of the conferences. The activity for the neediest ones to whom we serve, cannot leave us without time for reflection. For a calm perusal of our activity.

I understand that it would be very good, and that the consequences would be quickly felt in the conference life, if, at least once a quarter, we set aside one session of the conference in order to examine our way, and the capacity in which we are not only to attend to the poverty that comes up and is detectable around us; but also to discover new causes of suffering and see clearly if we are ready to receive new fellow members among us (12). That is: if we are attractive in our procedures and in the image others perceive of our group, so that they feel attracted and in the need of joining our peculiar way of looking after our brothers' suffering. Of joining our Christian community of prayer and action. I have sometimes the feeling that there is no enough of that eagerness given by faith, due to an unfounded shyness when giving to others, in what we do and in the benefits we get (13).

At this stage and, though I will resume later the issue of how to welcome new fellow members, it is good to remember our duty of drawing new members to our fraternal groups and this for two main reasons. The first one –the order not meaning any priority, and both having the same importance- is in order to find more resources to attend our needy friends (14). In order to keep growing in the heed to all the necessities arising around us. Secondly, for an apostolic requirement. For the good that each of the new confreres will find in our Vincentian brotherhood. The same good that we all found one day when arriving at the Conference which has given us so much. I do

state, without the slightest doubt, that the conference that does not grow each year, has lost its ability to inspire love, to convince. It has stopped being attractive and is lost; it means that it moves away from the ideal of our groups which, because of their tolerance, coolness, freedom, friendship, capacity of commitment, etc., should always be attractive for those observing us from outside.

Having said that, this seems a good opportunity to revise, in the privacy of our groups, with each of you and with the modest help that the following lines want to be, and to think about what should be a conference meeting, what should be the peculiar Vincentian ways that, in our meetings, have proved, through so many years of experience, to contribute to the final objective of our fraternal association that, we should not forget it, consists above all in moving along the road of perfection that will take us to the House of the Father (15).

To begin with, let us remember that the conferences were created to contribute to the deepening of its members' faith (16). Helping the ones in need will feed the spirituality experienced within the conference, whose heat in its turn, enables and fosters the charitable impulse, the love to others (17). It enables to reach the highest peaks of dedication to the ones who suffer, if we are able to remain together and in communion with the Divine Master. The conference meeting is, then, the place where we go to deepen our faith, to strengthen our hope and to commit ourselves in charity and love.

Once reminded of these basic principles of our Vincentian philosophy, it is time to re-examine and comment the different moments of a conference meeting, what I will try to do in the same order as they usually happen.

These outlines, to which most of the time we attach little value, contribute highly to create the right atmosphere that should be over the conference meeting.

The periodicity is essential to keep and develop an increasingly deep and close friendship among the fellow members. But it is essential too, so that our help to the suffering ones be as efficient as required. We should always keep in mind that our effort is urgent, since

it is addressed to people, people that suffer. Since the foundation of our conferences, it is thought that the weekly is the ideal rhythm of our meetings. To shorten the frequency of them is sometimes impossible, and to set them fortnightly seems a time too long to give the appropriate service.

The premises of the meeting, obviously not luxurious, will be a decent place, if possible located in the same area we work, known by the needy friends and by the different religious and social agents working in the area, with whom we have to be constantly in touch for the availability and full collaboration in the service to those in need. If we could afford it, it will be a place pleasant to stay in. Neither freezing in winter, nor suffocating in summer. A physical space, where we should try to feel comfortable and incorporate it to our universe.

Traditionally, conferences have been very close and working in parish premises of the areas where they worked. It is highly recommended to be so, since it will be easier for us to integrate and collaborate on the parochial and diocesan pastoral letter. Nevertheless, when this is not possible due to different adverse circumstances, our groups should fit out other places for their meetings and make most of them. Not only our funds should be at the poor's service, but also everything we have and could be aimed for the service, no matter how small.

It is also advisable, and the experience in many places has proved so, to seek a frequent relationship among the fellow members outside the Vincentian meeting itself (18). Common entertainment, social life, etc. help us, in most of the cases, feel members of a community that fully shapes our lives not only during the weekly meeting (19).

Punctuality is a basic rule in any social community. It is very important that each confrere arrives some minutes in advance at the meeting in order to start on time. The latecomers will avoid causing heedlessness to the ones already present. It is maybe the first act of love, of dedication, that the rest of the fellow members require of us.

Let us go on now to examine the meeting itself. It starts with the opening prayer said by the President. We all should be in an attitude of

dialogue. This is, finally, the prayer. Thinking of what we are doing, let us ask, in earnest, for the Spirit's help. The community is gathered. Let us open the heart to the Father and to our brethren. I think that it is the meeting's most important moment since it lays the way for what is to follow. It prepares us to accept being instruments. We should not say it mechanically (20).

We have to understand most seriously that we are feeling as a group, as a community, in God's presence and in order to act on His behalf, in His presence. The spirit with which we say this first prayer has an influence on the way we perceive the different subjects along the meeting.

The following reading and meditation should be on a text that fosters our Christian and ecclesiastic life, the lay and Vincentian charisma, and the deepening in love. Also, on texts that question our performance. That remind us of the duty to watch out for new forms of suffering against which we are obliged to react and fight (21). We should remember that our effort should be directed towards helping to overcome the situation in which our needy friends are. Not simply attend to the effects: also, look for the causes. At this moment, the secretary should not be drawing up the minutes, or the treasurer the accounts. It is the central moment of the meeting. We have to link the soul directly to the ear. As a suggestion, it is useful that, every week, different fellow members care about looking for material for the meditation-reading, not only the spiritual adviser, and that this one does not exceed ten minutes. Afterwards, some moments of silence will help to internalize what we have listened to.

We have already assimilated what we have heard. Something in the text has spoken to the deepest part of ourselves. Now, it is about putting in common, about enriching ourselves, with the confreres' comments. There should be ten or fifteen minutes full of opinion exchange and of spiritual and intellectual enrichment.

In this putting in common, the religious adviser is essential. He (/she) will teach us with his social skills, his charity, without seeking any kind of self-centredness. He will centre the discussions, will correct when necessary and, with every body's help, will keep the care of the faith and the doctrine. If there is no religious adviser, that should be the

task of the conference's president or of any other member especially prepared for it.

Later, we have the reading of the minutes of the previous session and of the treasury's accounts, that have been brought, respectively, by the secretary and the treasurer. Both will be approved by the members of the conference, with the pertinent nuances.

Then, there is the moment of discussing the situation of our needy brothers we serve . The pairs in charge will explain the situation of each of them, the most urgent need and the way to solve it. Let us pay attention to the other confreres' opinion, in comments always ruled by charity. They will help with their advice to find the best answer. It is advisable that all the fellow members follow this part of the meeting with a lot of interest. The experience of each one can, undoubtedly, be useful to the others.

Each week, let us specially put a couple in charge of explaining in detail, the circumstances through which a specific family is going, or the task they have been entrusted. Their story, their needs, their defects and virtues, etc. in order to know how to encourage the latter and lessen the former. Finally, in order to serve better. In this way, the whole conference will be informed of the situations it shelters, and it will be easier to continue the task started when a fellow member cannot attend the meeting due to any circumstance. Many conferences, change frequently the components of the visitors' pairs and of the families or actions they somehow guide. It usually gives a very good result, obtaining like this different criteria that help to achieve a better service.

Do not forget those who are far away and we do not see with the eyes, but to whom we are obliged to perceive with the soul. The poor exist everywhere and in all societies, no matter how rich they look. When we do not see poor people, economically speaking, around us; when attending poverty of different kind: moral one, illnesses, etc. let us remember that, in other cities, in other nations, other fellow members like us suffer for not being able to attend so many needs that could be fully satisfied with a small part of the resources of the conferences in other latitudes. Let us make it get there. Without stinginess. Knowing that it will be well administered by Vincentians like

us. Let us open our soul to the world. Let us globalize our outlook. Let us overcome the smallness of our immediate, being aware of the fact that Christ wanted us to be universal. Let us incorporate little by little our sense of belonging to a Society of Saint Vincent de Paul that is universal.

Do not forget either the fellow members that stop attending the conference meetings: are they ill? Have we disappointed them in some way? Are they going through a difficult moment? How could we forget the ones closest to us, if we claim to look after the ones outside the conference's community?

A great habit, unfortunately a little bit lost, is the previous introduction of the candidates, future fellow members, to work with us.

It is advisable that the confrere introducing a new member explain in a meeting his wish to invite him to belong to the conference. He will inform his brothers of the new member's personal circumstances, of the reasons driving him to join the conference and, basically, of how the conference can help him in his life process.

It is important to gauge our strength. To check if we are able to welcome the new member to whom we should always pay a preferential and singular attention, but specially until he succeeds in feeling comfortable among us. It is important that we dare grow up and assume the risk that this always implies. We will ask for help to the Spirit and then we will reach an agreement that will be stated in the minutes. In the next meeting, we will welcome the new brother, aware of the challenge we accept: the one of growing up, which is always to climb a step further in the road of perfection, where our Father has summoned us (22).

Then comes the collection. The money time? No. The time for sharing, for giving up (23). Not only for being ready to give from our leftovers. For dispensing with what hurts us in our wish to own. For sharing our possession with a suffering brother, that needs it urgently. It is not said more or less than us: but "urgently". The meeting has "warmed us up". We have shared the others' problems. We have made them ours. Now, in a secret collection, let us try to bring the necessary means so that some of our needy brothers suffer less.



At the end of the meeting, let us thank God with the final prayers. The hour and a half or two hours of the meeting get to an end. Let us stop to ask the Lord for help to keep the love fire obtained during the meeting so that it shapes the whole of our life, not only during the conference session: all our time. Let us put our trust in Mary, Mother of the Church, through the blessed Frederic Ozanam and Saint Vincent. Afterwards, let us go and flood the world with the love that, all together, we have been able to mirror from the Father.

Finally, there is the visit to the friends in need, the personal contact with the suffering one. In few words, this will be, as an old fellow member used to say, “without watch”. It is as if we were with our dearest relative. No hurry. No impositions. With tolerance. Respecting scrupulously his freedom of choice, even if he is wrong (24). We try to share with him, to help him, not to organize his life. If, in the end, he feels with us and discovers the final objective of the conferences’ whole action –the personal sanctification of members and needy friends, whose burden we want to share and make ours-, it will depend on the goodness with which we present our options, on the attention, sympathy and closeness we use to advise him, on the sincerity we show with our dedication.

My dear friends: from the beginning of time, with the Sacrament of Baptism (25), we are all called to spread the Good News. All of us. Not only those Christians who have been summoned to the direct ecclesiastical consecration. In our time, this call becomes specially urgent. If it is urgent for the whole of God’s People, it is particularly so for us that have clearly committed ourselves to serve the poor. We have to practise what we preach. It is true. But we also have to get used to preaching to men, in person, on the fact that God loves them. The Holy Church needs, specially today, agents to spread the Gospel (26); men and women that take the Christ’s message to the places of work, of entertainment, to families, etc. Incorporating the message to all acts of our everyday life.

Our founders, that group of young people that knew how to interpret Vincent de Paul’s heritage better than anybody, bequeathed to us the Saint of the poor as a life example. In these moments, it is specially interesting and necessary for the Vincentians in their

ecclesiastical service, to retrieve the missionary legacy of Saint Vincent (27).

It is the moment of the lay's commitment, as we are often reminded of. But is so for the lays in community. In groups of mutual aid. We should not forget to foster that fundamental wealth of our Institution. That also compels to action. Everyday, each Vincentian should end his day knowing that, without stridency, aware of being unworthy of the message he carries, in a total normality, with joy, he has taken God, he has taken the presence of the Man's Son, to each one of the places where he has been.

I turn my eyes to Mary, She, Who is our Mother, get from our Heavenly Father that we could serve the poor well and faithfully, according to the example of Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam.

José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha  
XIV International General President.

- (1) You represent an obvious expression of the charity practised in all the continents, the service to the poor that is, as Mr. Vincent used to say, a way of serving Christ. For your daily dedication, your association represents for the Church a permanent reminder of her vocation to express Christ's love to the poor (John Paul II, in his message to the Society of St. Vincent, the 14<sup>th</sup> April 2001).
- (2) The Society's main objective is to form a group or association of mutual encouragement for Catholic young people, where we find friendship, support, example, a substitute for the Christian family in which we have grown up...So, the strongest bond is the principle of a true friendship, it is charity, and charity cannot exist without spreading outwards (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, letter to L. Cournier, 4.11.1834).
- (3) Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be

condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and you will be given (Lk 6, 36-38).

- (4) I cling to the Catholic doctrine more than to the very life, whereby I love and serve the Catholic Church with all my heart (Blessed Frederic Ozanam).
- (5) Besides the spiritual education, it is required a solid theological, doctrinal, moral and philosophical preparation, depending on the age, condition, and capacity. The importance of the general culture, together with the practical and technical training, should never be neglected. (Vatican II, Apostolate of the Lay, 29).
- (6) The Gospel cannot penetrate deeply people's conscience, life and work without the active presence of the lay (Vatican II, Decree on the Church" missionary activity, 21 a).
- (7) Always ready to account for your hope to anybody asking you for an explanation, but with good manners and keeping the conscience fair (1 Pe. 3, 15).
- (8) The whole mankind have the same destiny and do not diversify any more into different scattered histories. Mankind go thus from a more static conception of reality, to another one more dynamic and evolutionary, out of which arises a new set of problems that require new analysis and new synthesis. (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the world, 5c).
- (9) Let us remember, my fathers and brothers, that we will not attain this happiness, this honour, if we do not strive to keep the holy union that we have recommended you so much; for it, you have to use the means that we have pointed out, specially the mutual esteem and respect among us and, above all, the holy humility and the avoidance of any kind of criticism or slander.. (St. Vincent de Paul, conference to the Fathers of the Mission, 13 December 1.658).
- (10) The institutions, laws, ways of thinking and feeling, inherited from the past, are not always suitable to the present state of things, (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the world, 7b).

- (11) (The lay) offer their experience and take on the responsibility in the management of these organizations, in the diligent examination of the conditions in which they have to practise the Church's pastoral action, and in the elaboration and development of the ways of action. (Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay, 420 b)
- (12) The joys and hopes, the sadness and distress of men in our time, especially of the poor and suffering, are, at the same time, the joys and hopes, the sadness and distress of Christ's disciples (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the world, 1).
- (13) Faith enlightens everything with a new light and reveals the divine plan on man's whole vocation (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the world, II a).
- (14) Let us make grow and multiply, let us strive to be better, more tender and stronger, because, as the days go by, we can see evil joining evil, and misery joining misery. (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, letter to Bailly, 22 October 1836).
- (15) Be perfect, then, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5, 48).
- (16) We felt the wish and the need to keep our faith, in the middle of attacks from the different schools of false prophets. It was then when we said, let us work! Let us do something consistent with our faith. But, what else could we do to be true Catholics, but devote ourselves to what most pleases God? Let us, then, help our fellow creatures, as Jesus did, and let us put our faith under the sheltering wings of charity (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, speech to the Conference of Florence, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1853).
- (17) So that Jesus' s spirit reigns in them and gives them the firmness of perseverance in this way of life (it refers to the service to the poor) of the spiritual whole, though it should manifest in continuous external actions that seem low and despicable in the eyes of the world, but which are great before God (St. Louise de Marillac, letter to sister Marguerite Chetif, 10<sup>th</sup> January 1.660).

- (18) For this reason, the Conferences which would only take care of the poor, without the Visiting sisters striving to foster the relationships of Christian friendship and fraternal affection, would not correspond to one of the essential goals of the Work (Jules Gossin, IIIrd General President of SSVP, Circular from 1-11-1847).
- (19) The lay, by cultivating the Christian friendship, help each other in all their needs (Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay 4, f).
- (20) To examine oneself to discover our ties in order to break them. In fact, my brothers, the effectiveness of prayer should tend to know well our inclinations and attachments (St. Vincent de Paul, Conference on indifference 16.05.1659).
- (21) We do not learn the science of social welfare and beneficent reforms so much by bending over books or listening to politicians, than by climbing to the poor's floor, sitting at his bedside, suffering the cold he suffers and sharing the secret of his distressed heart and his ruined conscience. Only when we have studied the poor in this way, at home, in hospital, at the workshop, in the cities, on the fields and in all the circumstances in which God put him, only then, provided with all the elements of such a huge problem, we begin to understand it and can think of solving it (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, l'Ere Nouvelle, 14 October 1848).
- (22) They praised God and enjoyed the people's affection. Everyday, the Lord added to the Community those to be saved (HCH, 2, 47).
- (23) The collection gains a significant value, because it is not about giving from the superfluous to relieve our conscience, but about taking on the misery present in the world with sympathetic concern. When considering the painful face and the misery of our brothers and sisters, we cannot refuse to share, at least part of our own possessions with those who are in difficulty. (John Paul II, message for the Lent of the year 2001).
- (24) Who, obeying Christ, looks above all, for God's reign, finds in This a stronger and purer love to help all his brothers and to undertake the work of justice under the inspiration of charity. (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the world 72b).

- (25) Christian faithful are those who, embodied in Christ by the Baptism, make up God's People and, sharing so Christ's actual, prophetic and priestly function, depending on their conditions, are called to fulfil the mission that God entrusted the Church in the world (Catechism of the Church, 871).
- (26) Such evangelic mission (of the lay), i.e. Christ's announcement proclaimed by life's testimony and by the word, takes a specific characteristic and an exceptional effectiveness due to the fact that it is carried out in the ordinary conditions of the world. (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 35b).
- (27) Do you not think that many workers that are idle could be used in the big harvest where they now work, and that the ones who know how badly the Lord of the crops needs more labour, will be the ones to blame for His Son's Blood which they make useless for lack of application? (Saint Vincent de Paul, letter to a clergyman, 9.7.1633).