

Paris, 30th June 2002

A CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR CONFRERES, MEMBERS OF SAINT VINCENT'S CONFERENCES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

« To serve the Youth in hope »

Dear friends, Brothers and Sisters :

Since its origins, when these first confreres, scarcely having finished their adolescence, gathered in community firstly to defend the Church and then, to dedicate themselves to the poor through personal contact with all those who suffered, the Society of Saint Vincent has always shown some extraordinary concern towards the youth. More exactly, for the participation of the youth in the Conferences life.¹

In the first Circular Letters of my predecessors, the former Presidents Generals, this wish was expressed together with some sort of concern because of the increasing average age of some confreres: if this was obviously a guarantee for the future of the Conferences, it was also true that the age, each time older of the members of the Society, made two problems evident. The first one and undoubtedly the most important was that the task of helping the younger ones in their training, bursting forth from the enthusiasm and from the same youth of the founders, would run the risk of not corresponding anymore with the principal objective for which they met together: helping each other along the way as, more often than we wish, we, the older ones, very often believe that we do not need to reinforce nor deepen our training, our knowledge. An obvious mistake but not less true for this, unfortunately. Secondly, the ageing of the confreres could very well go together, as is frequently the case, with some loss of the capacity to respond on behalf of the Society, faced with the problems it deals with. We all admit, without doubt, a greater capacity of the youth to detect first and then, to react to injustice and despair, very often too large in the world. It is exactly the contrary of what we do, we, who consider ourselves, again wrongly, as very well established in a number of truths that we do not consider necessary to revise on a regular basis nor submit to self criticism. Without forgetting the everlasting enthusiasm that always accompanies the actions of the youth as they are still pure, not yet spoilt and as they do not yet feel the tiredness, inherent in life.

In this way, youth has always constituted a great concern within the Conferences. For this reason, it is very good to dedicate a few moments to think about their participation in the Society and about the capacity of the later to serve them. I said: to serve them. It is under this aspect and only under this one that we must especially contemplate the permanency of the youth and of any other member², within the Conferences. Trying to present the Society as it is: a project of Christian life for ever, until our journey finishes in the

world. A journey that we will undertake more relieved, if we follow this path together with our brothers and sisters sharing our faith, worries and hopes.³ This is what we should convey to them: the feeling of belonging to a group which, with the freedom to leave at any moment, offers us friendship, support, fraternity and which, throughout the world feels, lives and worries for the same problems.

You will remember that, in my Circular Letter of this same date, just a year ago⁴, I was referring to the relationship that should motivate the meeting among members. I was writing about the necessary fraternity before each Conference, in order to enable us to better serve the poor. I even affirmed that, without this companionship, the group of people helping the poor could surely achieve a great task but, without the fraternity among confreres, there would not be an authentic Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul. True friendship should lead us to care about the needs of the confrere who share with us the life of the Conference, at all levels. Once these needs are detected which affect, in the majority of the cases, affection, spirituality and training, it becomes evident that our esteem for the confreres will lead us to serve them at the same time as trying to make everything possible in order for them to overcome these deficiencies with our fraternal help. All this is especially directed towards the youngest members of our Conferences.

When the older confreres, in any place in the world, ask me about the absence of young members within Conferences, I always ask them to be patient and to be willing to serve them. Not to use them. Not to maintain them among us for social survival or pure statistics. However, alone, many questions arise in my mind: Why are there not more young people among us? Where are our children, who should have received the example of our dedication to our confreres and to the poor, within each one of our families? Are they selfish people that only care about their own well-being? But the question that finally remains is: In what have we deceived them in order for them not to be willing to be among us? At what moment of our commitment are we acting wrongly or are we communicating badly?

I am sure that some day, we all asked these same questions as well as many others, about our relationship with our children or with our younger relatives and friends and we have not always found -or almost never- any valid answer. An answer that satisfies us, of course. We often see them - young people - dedicate themselves to some other matters with a real passion and even with some detachment. We do not dare to accuse them of being selfish, in our hearts, and we end up thinking that time will solve the situation. That one day, they will understand it and they will come with us. Unfortunately, it is not that simple.

Young people, despite the laziness we, the older people have always accused them of, are, were and always will be transformation agents within the societies they live in. They are as necessary in this role inside the Conferences and, unconsciously, in many occasions, what confreres demand without

realizing it, is this capacity of adaptation to changes that they have almost lost and that they think young people will bring with them.

But this, as I indicated above, must not be our concern. The renewal of each Conference, of each one of us lies in ourselves and in the intensity with which we live the community of prayer and action that should be, undoubtedly, each one of the basic groups of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul⁵. This is, without doubt, one of our capacity to live and spread the Gospel.

The concern to attract youth in the Conferences and which we indubitably should feel, must come from the fact that we assume the responsibility we have towards the youngest ones. Responsibility as for the project of Christian life that should mean each one of them and which the Council Vatican II reminds us⁶. Therefore and firstly, an ecclesial responsibility. We must urgently convey the Good News to all men and women, starting with the closest ones. This obligation is especially directed towards the lay people who endeavour to live their life in communities of prayer and action.

Young people, as a Vincentian publication⁷ very well pointed out , « are projects of life whose fulfilment we must work at throughout their lives and deepen their self training ». And we could add to this, the dedication to their neighbours. A life we are part of, by sharing our spiritual experience, our knowledge according to which the process of getting close to God, to understand Him, to feel Him and to participate is a long process that is not always easy⁸.

We must show young people, as an example, the daily and personal effort of each one of the members of the Conferences on the path we initiated one day in the deepening of our faith, service and goal. The goal we are each day more conscious of as well as the distance that separates us from it because of our imperfections. We must also accompany young people in taking responsibilities before every matter they will have to deal with during their lives. To show them what is a good parent, a good spouse, a good professional, a good friend in order for them to merit being considered as a genuine parent, spouse, professional, and friend...⁹. In short: a genuine human being, that deserves such a name.

Regarding the matter of deepening faith: Will they be willing to join us when it seems that we have reached some kind of holiness that often appears under an unpleasant and even sad shyness instead of showing them the contagious joy of a Christian?. Yes: joy, even before the pain. There is nothing that makes the suffering worse than the feeling of being accompanied by sadness or abandonment. How could we demonstrate to them that it is a project of spiritual growth for our whole life, when it seems that we already have made the journey and already reached the truth? Which child will get use to reading if he never sees his father with a book in his hands? Who will get use to praying, to feeling small and weak before the strength and the love of

God, if they do not have the example of those who pray? From those who say that they are in debt with our Lord?.

If they see us criticizing other friends, if they see us weak when facing the efforts life demands from us at all levels, if they find in us a thousand justifications to abandon the work to which we are called for, how could we hope that we attract them and essentially that we serve them?.

The way of getting young people among us, of serving young people, goes necessarily through our personal conversion. Conversion of each one of the older members, to a choice of service through and for young people. A choice of service that will lead us to a deep renewal of ourselves. Admitting that we have not reached, far from it, any particular wisdom, but the one that is granted to us by the weight of the years. Starting to be tolerant with us and among us. Respecting the freedom of the other. Knowing that we are in a process of education, I repeat of education, at all levels, and which must last for our whole life and which we must share with them, without false barriers between generations and in an harmonious exchange of quality¹⁰.

Not without renouncing to point out what we consider as wrong positions and what, in our opinion (a wise opinion of a friend), require more than a correction: a conversion. Without becoming, in order to make their stay easier, the easy accomplice of situations that must be pointed out as contrary to Christian spirit. Recalling the advice of our President General: "be useful to young people in everything, as long as caution and discretion allow us, and which are the first among all conventions" (J. Gossin, Circular from 8-12-1844). Tolerance, so necessary among us, cannot be exerted in benefice of our commodity. For the commodity of the former confreres. Tolerance must not be a pretext that justifies what is simply badly done and we must show it. Today, as before and more than ever, not everything is good and valid. With no recriminations, fraternally, knowing that we too are so awkward, it is possible that, at a determined moment, the youngest of our confreres be called to point us out, with the same fraternity, our thousand defects and treacheries to the Christian ethos that we are supposed to serve. Helping each other.

Listening and equally accepting the initiatives of the youngest, with respect and attention. When the first confreres met together and discovered the necessity of exercising charity, the need not to limit their task to the purely intellectual defence of the Holy Church, Frederic Ozanam received from his friends, the mission of counting on the collaboration and the management of Mister Bailly. The St. Vincent de Paul's Conferences were born because Mister Bailly was able to listen to and to be enthusiastic about the proposals of a young person that was not even 20 years old. He visited him in his interest and in the representation of some other friends, among whom, only one had reached this age. The St. Vincent de Paul's Conferences exist today, undoubtedly, because Mister Bailly did not care about the age of those who proposed to him their ideas and he listened to their argumentation with respect¹¹. Let us recall that the Spirit acts where It wishes and how It wishes.

We must carry on the process of Vincentian regeneration within all Conferences, as I have been claiming since my election to this service, for which you called me. A permanent process that has a beginning but that has not got an end.

Thanks to this, we shall demonstrate to our future young confreres that our way of life is a way of life of commitment. We shall demonstrate that we do not want them at our side because of our concern of survival as an Institution. Our concern consists in not wasting the resources that the years grant us in order to be able to help them on the path that they have chosen, even if they must face it by themselves, without lessening their capacity of choice nor their freedom; so that we can tell them that some day we have gone through similar circumstances¹². Help them, in short, in order for them to have the necessary information so they can decide freely. No limits to their freedom of knowledge. To know in order to have precise information. It is rather the contrary: freedom finishes very often with ignorance we are confronted in many occasions and in the most diverse circumstances. What we want for our young people, for those we will have approached or for those who will approach us, is to contribute, whenever possible, to help them to overcome the poverty of their lack of experience. With our collaboration, with the experience of the poverty we have lived ourselves. Never by imposition nor order. And, of course, in the complementarity, by receiving from them the necessary tension to be able to serve a world they probably know better than us, sometimes. Being humble in this recognition.

This is the way of working within the Conferences. A way of creating, maintaining and developing an ecclesial community of equal people, that birth date does not make any difference.

We shall start to feel responsible. Yes, responsible. Every generation ensured the following a better and ordered world. It is not an exception for us. We have promised a better and an easier world. We were responsible for making and defending a tidier world that we promised to be easier and which disappointed them, may be because of our very lack of security. The way in which our civil societies live, in a permissive relativism, which does not give any answers to their worries nor their needs. Which puts an end to the hope of so many people, for what we also are responsible for, we, the components of the Conferences as we locked ourselves in the vigorous defence of our circumstantial and temporal truth, instead of opening ourselves to the revitalizing, regenerative and timeless sweetness of the faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ.

We must all feel the need and the responsibility for this service to the younger ones. But, more particularly, the Presidents of Conferences. They have to take care, especially, of their confreres who, one day, elected them to direct and serve them as examples. They must be the first ones in being attentive and in making the permanence of young people among us easier as

well as giving the appropriate service that they expect from the Conferences. Through the deep knowledge they will acquire from every one of their confreres, as a good parent would do, they will know to which one of their "children" it is possible to entrust with this ministry among the youngest ones of our Brothers and Sisters and which one of them they will need to make grow in the service, enrich the knowledge in order for them to obtain it.

In the same way, they will be able to entrust their younger confreres with some real responsibilities which will make them each time more linked to the Conference. They must not see in ourselves some distant "teachers" even if they are attentive. They must find groups of human beings that, in their generous dedication to the poorest ones, to the confreres and to the Church as well as to their professional and own family life, offers them a true place of participation in which all enrich themselves¹³.

Let us tell young people: dear friends, we want to be close to you. We want to undertake the journey in your company. Would you allow us to do so? Are you going to help us in the wonderful journey of our Conferences? We want to be able to count on you so that we can support each other mutually. In order to be a community of prayer, action and hope. We want to serve those who suffer together with you. We want to preserve the living fire of God's love. Come to us to learn and to teach us! One only arrives to old age when one has lost the capacity of learning or teaching another human being.

Let us assure them that poor people are waiting for us: those who suffer, those who cry, the persecuted, the sick, the abandoned, the deprived, there are so many !. They are waiting for the immense strength that we all represent together. And that we are among those who are waiting for them, us, the older confreres. We, these old friends who already wish to welcome you within the groups of Conferences. Some of us have seen their points of view become old and we, maybe, have become more inflexible. What we are expecting from you is joy, comprehension, a necessary effort to dialogue in order to get on well together and to understand each other. We need to understand, all together, that even the most humble, the oldest, the youngest, the best trained or the worst trained, has always something to say and that we must respect them¹⁴.

We shouldn't forget, may be I should have started my Letter with this, that without prayer, without true communication with the Lord, we cannot do anything. The Holy Father reminded us of this: « The efficacy of the apostolic work of the lay people, is closely linked to their spiritual basis, to their life of individual and community prayer, to the frequency with which they receive the Sacraments, above all the Eucharist, the penitence as well as an adequate doctrinal training" (John Paul II at the Episcopal Conference of Brazil 30-5-1995)

God bless you Mary! You who felt the need as a Mother, to serve your Divine Son in His first years, these same years during which He ran away to

teach the Doctors. Beg Him so that, in the service of our Conferences, we will be able to adapt to our times and that we will succeed in serving in a Christian way the youngest of our confreres, in order for them to help us preserve alive the alert Spirit that your Divine Son inspired to our founders.

With my affection for all in Saint Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam.

José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha
XIV President General International
(i.n.e.d.)

¹ « ...above all (referring to the youth) being very generous in their kindness to them, as all good parents wish to see their children surrounded with. » (Commentaries of the ICG on the old Rule, Spanish version 1963, p. 58).

² « serviens in spe », says the legend surrounding our new symbol as an aspiration of life of the Society from each confrere.

³ When God, in His goodness, gave me Ozanam as a friend, I was very young, abandoned to my own self...I felt my faith collapse and, the only strength that I could impose to the impulse of passions, weaken. I found Ozanam on my way to stop me at the edge of the precipice. I started to walk firmly again on the track that his example was tracing. (« Ozanam's youth », Léonce Cournier, page 22 and following (Paris, Librairie Henuyer, 1890).

⁴ Circular Letter to all the confreres in the world, dated 30th June 2001.

⁵ id. Same Letter Circular.

⁶ « We must prepare them – young people- to participate in social life so that, well instructed with the necessary and adequate means, they could actively assign themselves to the various groups of human society, they be ready to the dialogue with others and so that they could give their collaboration willingly for obtaining the common good. (Declaration « Gravissimus educationis » 1).

⁷ General Revitalization Plan of the Spanish Society, 1987.

⁸ All moments are not well chosen to introduce new ideas and Christian teachings in the hearts,; it is necessary to be able to wait God's hour and to be patient as He was. (Preliminary dispositions to the Rule of the SSVP, 1835).

⁹ Don't you recognize that everything perishes, that we wanted to reject God from everywhere and that, consequently, nothing can be re-established but re-establishing God in the field of our conscience and in our public as well as private habits ? (A. Baudon, III President General, Circular 1/11/1849).

¹⁰ You, older people, endeavour to start with young people a friendly dialogue which, once distances of the age are crossed, enables ones and the others to get to know each other mutually and to communicate what each generation has of good. You, adults, foster the youth to the apostolate, firstly with your example and in other occasions, with wise advice and efficient help. (Council of Vatican II, Decree « Apostolicam actuositatem » 12).

¹¹ The founders of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul were : Frederic Ozanam, Auguste Le Tallandier, Paul Lamache, Félix Clavé, François Lalier et Jules Devaux. Mister Bailly as well as another unknown confrere joined them. Apart from Mister Bailly himself and Paul Lamache, who was 20 years old, all the others were less than twenty years old.

¹² We must change the ideas, the inspirations, sometimes the fears and always hopes. (Blessed Frederic Ozanam, letter to the ICG dated 27/4/1838).

¹³ Have the highest esteem for the command of your own profession, the sense of family and civic spirit and for all the vertus that refer to social relationship, that is to say, Honour, justice, sincerity, good feelings and the strength of the soul without which a genuine Christian life cannot exist. (Council of Vatican II, Decree « Apostolicam actuositatem » 4).

¹⁴ Young people, from your part, be respectful to and trust your older ones, even if you feel a natural inclination for new things and learn how to appreciate, as is proper, valuable traditions. (Council of Vatican II, Decree « Apostolicam actuositatem » 12)