

# CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, MEMBERS OF CONFERENCES OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL IN THE WORLD

Paris, 30th june 2004

Dear friends and brothers,

All through the various sections of the Society's Rule, we find references to the Vincentian vocation of brothers and sisters. In other words, our Rule confirms that Vincentians initiate themselves, evolve and remain within the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul –within Conferences– because of a true vocation born in each one of them; a vocation to serve the poor, through belonging to a community of Faith which prays and acts together (1).

However, when a new member joins a Conference for the first time, he usually does it without being aware that he answers a specific vocation. In general, we join our first Conference with the idea of easing the pain of the poorest. We are able to do this thanks to a predisposition of our soul towards the poorest among our brothers, an attitude that we have nurtured since our youth, during our adolescence, and into maturity. We join a Conference to finally crystallize in action a desire hidden until then, most of the time, in a purely sentimental realm. It is only after we have spent some time in our Conference that we realize that what seemed to be, at first sight, our human preoccupation for the needy is not satisfactory anymore. It takes some time to realize that there is, among brothers who welcomed us upon our arrival, a sense of harmony and brotherhood that slowly reaches us, becomes ours, and goes far beyond a simple response to our co-responsibility towards human beings, implying a vocation.

However, even before that happens, before we realize that we really take part in a community of faith that implies a true Christian vocation of service, without being aware of it, we already answer a call from God (2) to work with the poorest. This explains why we have chosen a Christian institution rather than another institution to commit ourselves to.

Ecclesiastically speaking, a vocation is always a call from God for a specific task, to act in a specific capacity serving Christ and His Church. Our vocation, the Vincentian vocation of Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul's members, comes alive in service to the poor and to our brothers, with whom we form a community of prayer and action.

(1) While the new Rule was recently approved (Rome, October 2003) and not sufficiently published, known and broadcasted, I will undoubtedly recommend to the reader to read it with a clear mind, and to meditate on it individually and collectively as soon as possible. As for the content of this circular letter, I will particularly recommend chapters 1 and 2 of this new Rule, especially interesting.

(2) "All that does not come from God is only a shadow of the true vocation, even if we dress it up with beautiful ideas and excellent causes." (*Complete Works of Saint Vincent de Paul, VI, 149*)

In other words: the vocation (3) –the call– of Conference members consists in serving Christ Himself, whom we attempt to discover in every one of our needy brothers, whom we personally meet (4).

This said, we should now ask ourselves: what are the characteristics of our vocation? Let us try to define them.

First, our vocation requires a clear community of faith and teamwork, to which we dedicate ourselves and through which we will receive according to what we are able to give.

Second, our vocation leads us to meet the poor, which is to identify them through their suffering, and to be able to meet the challenges brought about by our missions to try to alleviate or eliminate this suffering. To do that, we need to train permanently to face the new threats that arise day after day.

Third, our vocation prescribes that we visit the poor in their own environment, where they feel at ease.

Fourth, our vocation asks us to feel the misery of those we meet and make it ours, and that this misery is only a close manifestation of a universal grief, to discover suffering in the world, and especially the poor's constant misery, and our own responsibility towards it, a responsibility that stems from our own life's imperfection.

Fifth, our vocation leads us to become aware of our responsibility to spread the Gospel among the poor. It leads us to embody the Church's love towards those who sometimes will not see the Church except through us. This manifestation starts with our baptismal commitment as a lay response to the Holy Church's most pressing necessity: to serve the poor. Our service to the poor brings us to collaborate, and to fight for the beginning of the Reign, here and now.

Sixth, our vocation pushes us to dedicate ourselves to a continuous and responsible service. Even though our belonging to the Society does not require from us formal temporal commitments, and even less vows of any kind, it is good to feel that what we engage in when we join a conference is a moral responsibility to serve the poorest.

Now, let us develop somewhat these six aspects of our vocation.

(3) "The word 'vocation', used several times by Pope Paul VI, speaking to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, clearly expresses the deep signification of the union felt by all its members." (*Declaration on the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Pierre Chouard, 9th President General, Paris 1968*).

(4) "Jesus Himself takes the initiative and calls upon us to follow Him. The call concerns mostly those upon whom is bestowed a particular mission, starting with the Twelve, but it is also certain that the condition of every believer is to be a disciple of Christ." (John Paul II V.S. 19b)

## Community of Faith

Ever since our foundation, we have not always given all the importance it deserved to the fact that each Conference, must be a community of Faith, prayer and action, as was the group of young people who made up the first Conference (5). In reality, they would have accomplished very little if the relationship between them had not been consolidated through spiritual friendship and belonging to one community who prayed and acted together. From the very beginning, brothers were part of a group who acted together most of the time, and not only through activities related to serving the poor. The first brothers shared a spiritual and human harmony through attending religious celebrations, and dining together before meetings among brothers. They were friends, spiritual companions, appreciated brothers, and in this union, in this unity, they found the strength to protect the poorest.

Common prayer, reinforced by individual prayer of every member, is one of the keys to success of Conferences. Very early, Conferences became aware that prayer would give them the strength to serve the poor and brothers alike, and that they would do it faithfully.

Nowadays, for every Conference to feel entitled to their name, they must experience the absolute need for this human and spiritual union, and there has to exist among brothers this feeling of community. A large part of Conferences that deserve to be called a Conference know about the many benefits to get from this, at all levels (6).

Finally, a community of faith must remain open to welcome new brothers, so they may join us and we can offer them the same fruits for their soul as the ones we obtained when we joined a Conference and thereafter during our evolution within the Conference. There cannot be true Vincentian Conferences without missionary spirit: a missionary spirit that has to be, of course, selective and careful, as regards those who wish to belong to Conferences (7). This must not be profitable only to them, although they must have this preoccupation as well, this requirement to improve themselves, it must also be good for the group to which they will belong, for the Conference itself (8).

(5) "We will love each other, now and always, closely or remotely, from one conference to another, from one country to another." (*Preliminary Considerations to the Rule of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Paris, 1835*)

(6) "To have desired, one day, to become 'brother' (or 'sister') of Saint Vincent de Paul, or 'Vincentian' as said according to locations or languages, is to translate into action a consequence of our Christian faith. It is not only the universal call of Christ to the spirit of charity, it is a particular dimension of this call: the intimate desire to 'personally and directly' participate in the 'service to the poor' through a 'man-to-man contact', by the 'personal gift of one's heart and friendship' – and to do so in a 'fraternal community of laypersons inspired by the same vocation'." (*Declaration on the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Pierre Chouard, 9th President General, Paris 1968*)

(7) "It can be a good thing for someone to participate in our charitable activities; but it might not be a good thing for the Society to count this person among its members." (*Preliminary Dispositions 1835*)

(8) Saint Vincent himself, more concerned by the personal motivation of those who joined the Congregation than by their number, reminded us that "(...) according to the Providence's ordinary path, God wishes to save men through other men, and Our Lord became Himself a man in order to save us all." (*Saint Vincent de Paul, Complete Works, VII, 292*)

## Serving the Poor

The second most important characteristic of our vocation is the capacity of each one of our groups to go out and serve the poor, as well as the effort that we must make each time to be able to detect suffering and even anticipate its first manifestations (9).

In other words, the Society of Saint Vincent must not wait for the poor to ask for help. It must not limit itself to attending the needs of the most obvious poverty, poverty that can be seen. Frequently, hidden poverty, the poverty that we do not see, causes much more suffering to those who experience it. We, Vincentians, must pay particular attention to new manifestations of human suffering, and all Conferences, in every area of the world, must be particularly aware, particularly open to discover new pain emerging in the civil society they wish to serve.

That necessarily implies permanent work in formation, and knowledge of the prevailing environment for the specific Conference. Brothers are called upon to avoid limiting themselves to in-depth study of the Holy Scriptures or spiritual activities. In addition to these activities, members, in order to live their vocation of service in an adequate manner, must know the fields of knowledge and pure information that will be necessary to their activities of service to the needy. We must know the social reality of the human community that we wish to serve. We must know about the shortcomings of the civil society where the Conference is established. We must be aware of the aspirations and needs of human beings whom the Conference wishes to help. In reality, we must aim to form ourselves on a permanent basis in order to adapt our service to actual needs, and not only those that are known and obvious.

## Personal Contact

Another characteristic of our vocation is personal contact with the poor. It was often said that one of the basic concepts of the Society is the visit. This affirmation is undoubtedly an exaggeration that has conditioned us negatively, more than it has helped us to discover our true vocation. **It is not true that the visit is a basic concept.** What counts is the personal contact (10) with those who suffer, wherever they feel free. Allow me to explain this.

When a Conference is born, it often happens, in our wish to help the poor, that we expect the poor to come where they can get help and that, often in an impersonal way, they have to tell about their pain, the suffering of

(9) "(...) manifestations of poverty evolve as the world and its various parts do. In all places, at all times, we must imagine a 'potential for misery', and the corresponding relief that can be provided. (Declaration on the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Pierre Chouard, 9th President General, Paris 1968)

(10) "At the beginning of the foundation, this was expressed in the language of the time, as the 'visit of the poor at home', considered as the prototype of Vincentian activities. Its sense must be translated in a more modern language: 'material charity' is not the only way to do that, we must also establish a personal dialogue with those who suffer (whatever type of suffering), in an attitude of mutual trust, personal respect and respect of the sacred place that is their home, a sharing of friendship and reciprocity of services rendered (...)" (Declaration on the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Pierre Chouard, 9th President General, Paris, 1968)

their soul, in unfamiliar surroundings. It often happens, at such times, that to do so in a strange location adds to their suffering. Furthermore, very often, those who listen to their problems are only employees of those who provide assistance to them. The poor then do not even get to know those who are helping them. Consequently, when a Conference is born, it believes that to respect those in whom Vincentians see Christ, means to meet them personally in the greatest possible delicacy and intimacy. This is where the home visit comes from, a visit taking place where we all feel the most secure: in our own home.

Actually, visiting the poorest at home is not always possible nowadays. Circumstances can prevent it. In principle, the shame resulting from the proximity of neighbours who find out about the visits, the fact that for so many of our friends home is the street itself, the danger of certain districts in some cities, the life in large residences for older people, and finally, various other circumstances can make home visits, a current activity of the Society of Saint Vincent, an impossible mission.

That is why, in these times it is fundamental to maintain a personal contact and to do so with the utmost of attention and in their own environment. An environment that should be the most comfortable for them and that is almost always the least comfortable for us. It is one of the major keys of our vocation: our dedication to those who need us, those with whom we almost always end up having a spiritual and human affinity, very close to friendship.

## To Share the Suffering

This spiritual and human connection with those who suffer brings us to another one of our vocation's characteristics: to share the suffering and understand its universality (11). In fact, if we see Christ in our brother the poor, if we love him to the extent of dedicating ourselves to alleviate his suffering, how can we not share it? How could it be possible to see someone suffer, day after day, and not want to share this suffering with a will to relieve it? The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, the Conferences do not want to see anyone being poor. They do not want the poor to exist. For this reason, they attempt to share their misery and contribute to its disappearance. To contribute with their feeble means, but with all the power of feeling protected by prayer, and daily personal and collective effort, to eliminate the causes of human misery that we are trying to share. A human being is, in our eyes unique and tangible, someone in whom we see God.

In their dedication to every human being, Vincentians are aware of the universality of poverty, and their co-

(11) "The source of the Vincentian vocation is at the same time human and divine: it manifests itself in the feeling of anguish at the sight of another human being's suffering, the spontaneous reaction of sympathy, even the violence that arises in front of injustices forced on our brothers in humanity." (Declaration on the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Pierre Chouard, 9th President General, Paris, 1968)

responsibility in the fight against poverty wherever it manifests itself. Every Conference knows that on its own, it is only a small part of a worldwide Work, and that in the company of all brothers, wherever they are, it is co-responsible for all Vincentian action against human misery wherever it exists. Each Vincentian feels the need to join this universal battle, either by individual or communal prayer, or by sending resources to other poorer Conferences.

## Responsibility to Spread the Good News

Each member of the Society feels that he is called to the Holy Church's missionary work. He feels a personal call to communicate to mankind the message that God loves us, to let everyone know that his dedication to the poor is only a very imperfect manifestation of God's perfect love for each one of us. It is a heavy responsibility, which we must never renounce (12).

This requirement of our service, practiced with the greatest prudence, must always be particularly present in acting upon our Vincentian vocation. It might be one of our vocation's greatest pitfalls, because it requires our utmost attention. Indeed, even though it is unthinkable to forget to communicate to the people we meet, this great wealth that is the knowledge of God, we must do it with the caution dictated by respect towards other human beings (13). To force others is not part of our action. It is not our role to use personal contact as a pulpit from where we preach morality to others, and we have no right to do so.

We must always deeply respect people who suffer, and consider them their own masters of destiny, and believe that the Lord will enlighten them whenever He wishes to do so (14). In other words, our evangelical mission shall never be carried forth from the position of a master who teaches, but rather from the position of a friend who shares enriching experiences, and silent example leading to reflection. We must be aware, when we approach another human being that very often, we will be for him the only image of the Holy Church that he will ever see. It is an extraordinary responsibility for each Vincentian, and one to which we must pay particular attention (15).

(12) "Through Him (the Messiah), we have received the gift of being apostles, for there will be among all people a response of faith in the honour of His name. You belong to it as well, answering the call from Jesus, the Messiah" (Roma. 1, 5-6)

(13) "We are all more or less useful servants; but we serve a Lord who is very careful, and lets nothing be lost, not even one drop of our sweat, nor a tear of dew." (Blessed Frederic Ozanam "Origins of the Christian Civilization" p. 33, Editions Agnus, Mexico 1946)

(14) "Belonging to it (in reference to God's people), comes from a special call, jointly with grace's salvation action." (John Paul II R.H. 21b)

(15) "It is painful to listen to the testimony of so many baptized in the Catholic Church—especially among the small people, whom we were unable to catechize, nor form adequately, but who have perhaps received help from Caritas, or from our social services—when they state that they had access to the Word of God, to the knowledge of Jesus and prayer, once they approached a Christian community." (Mgr Hector Aguer, Archbishop of La Plata, Latin America Pontifical Commission Conference, March 2003)

Christ invites us to expand His Kingdom, here and now, as Council Vatican II has so often repeated (16). In other words, one of the formulas, perhaps the most complete and sure one, for the daily consolidation of the Kingdom, is the practice of Love. The Vincentian, called upon by Love, in the intimacy of his vocation, is the perfect vehicle to expand the Kingdom and the presence of God among mankind (17).

## Continuous and Responsible Service

No one required that we formally commit our time or anything else when we joined the conference (18). All of us were free, humanly speaking, in our choice to enter the movement, and will remain so if we wish to abandon our Vincentian mission. However, we seek to dedicate ourselves in a responsible fashion.

After knowing so much suffering, seeing so much need, and aware of so many necessities, we, Vincentians, provide a service that we feel we must provide and maintain continuously and responsibly. This service, that does not start, nor end, with the work of the Conference. This service is a lifestyle, an understanding of the world we work in that affects our whole existence, which must affect our familial, professional and even recreational relationships. How could we ignore so much suffering in our daily life? How could we curl up within our own bubble, while working within the Conference, which would isolate us from other sides of our life? I do not believe that this is possible.

On the contrary, a knowledge of the poor, a deep respect for each one of them, a brotherhood also shared with them, all must shape our lives in such a way that in any given situation, at any given time, we seek around us the poor that we wish to serve; the one to whom we want to smile, make a gesture, say something nice. Let us make it a habit to look for the poor that we all carry within ourselves and may this quest radically change our lives.

Our mission starts from the moment that we see Christ in each one of them, and it will be difficult to end it. It will transform itself into a need of our soul that will never disappear, because we will be engaged in a permanent transformation process for Christ and towards Christ (19).

Once more, upon ending this meeting with my brothers and sisters of the world, I wish to address Mary. Mediator of all graces, authentic bastion for those of us with the smallest means, the weakest among us: She will give us the necessary strength to continue our service and to make it better every day with the ones that Her Son prefers: the abandoned, the suffering, the persecuted, the solitary...

May She help us to recognize and follow the model proposed by Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam, as well as Hers.

With my affection to all,

José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha  
(i.n.e.D.)

*14th President General*

(16) "But the Lord wishes to spread His kingdom also by means of the laity, namely, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace (4\*). In this kingdom creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God. (Roma. 8,21)" (Vatican II Council, Constitution "Lumen Gentium" 36)

(17) "One engages in the apostolate through the faith, hope, and charity which the Holy Spirit diffuses in the hearts of all members of the Church. Indeed, by the precept of charity, which is the Lord's greatest commandment, all the faithful are impelled to promote the glory of God through the coming of His kingdom and to obtain eternal life for all men - that they may know the only true God and Him whom He sent, Jesus Christ." (Vatican II, Apostolicam Actuositatem Decree 3)

(18) "The Vincentian Rule does not obligate in conscience, and that should reassure the most scrupulous. A secular experience shows that aspiration towards this evangelical ideal is not heroic: poor Christians in a tropical country, exhausted workers, leaders facing difficult tasks, students stressed about their studies..." (Declaration on the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Pierre Chouard, 9th President General, Paris, 1968)

(19) "This thoroughly evangelical process (to reach God's merciful love through men) is not only a spiritual transformation achieved once and for all, but constitutes a lifestyle, an essential and continuous characteristic of the Christian vocation." (John Paul II, D.M. 14b)