

Paris, 30th June 2005

**CIRCULAR TO MY DEAR FELLOW MEMBERS
OF THE CONFERENCES OF SAINT VINCENT
DE PAUL IN THE WORLD**

Dear friends and fellow members:

With the joy of writing to the friends with whom I share not only the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, but also the way in which we assume it at the service of the Holy Church of the poor (1), I resume one year more this epistolary personal close contact with each of my fellow members in the world. Peace and good for all.

The ones who read my letter of June 2004 will remember that in it I referred to the six strong points in the vocation of the Conferences' fellow members. This year, I will refer to three subjects that I consider very important for the life of each of our Conferences: relationships among fellow members, responsibility of the Presidents, and relationship with priests and Bishops and their place in the Society. The three of them determine in many occasions our service to the poorest, which undoubtedly is the core of the Conferences' vocation of service. I don't expect to cover thoroughly any of them with these short reflections. Just to offer these to the Conferences so that each of them meditate about them and draw their own conclusions which no doubt, will enrich the community life of every one of them.

Starting with the relationships among fellow members, we should always seek that their predominant features be love, friendship, care and politeness that we try to convey to those suffering for any reason (2). It is so in most of the cases whereby a Conference without these qualities would be unconceivable. We come to the Society, dear fellow members, to get together in the charity of Christ, and to try to represent it, although imperfectly, for those forlorn we are

visiting. But also for the fellow members that form with us the Society in the world (3).

This is the case for most of the thousands of Conferences and Councils spreading all over the world. It is comforting to see the deep generous friendship that rules our relationships and the true devotion that the fellow members feel for one another (4).

Nonetheless, the relationships among fellow members are not always easy. Sometimes, we find Conferences that have important problems of relationship among some of their fellow members, often caused by a misunderstood wish of achieving a better service. We cannot forget that a Conference is a community of men and women that bring and project to the group their personality and their character, thereby generating sometimes possible conflicts. Nonetheless, this is why the group exists, the Conference: to help one another to overcome our little 'egos' that we sometimes want to impose; to smooth our mistakes over; to live in virtue and try to be a life example for those around us and for those we help (5).

These difficulties of relation have always as a result a worse service to the poorest and they give a sad image of the gentle ecclesiastic relationship that should be present among us and that we should represent for others. When these misunderstandings appear, we often deceive

(1) "The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is a Christian community that spreads all over the world..." (Art. 1.1. Rule SSVP).

(2) "Vincentians strive to establish relationships based on trust and friendship" (Art. 1.9 Rule SSVP).

(3) "The Society of Charity should devote itself to acquire and practise all virtues: but there are some that are specially needed by its members in order to carry out the good works they are in charge of, such as: self-denial, Christian soundness, great love for others, zeal for the soul salvation, meekness of heart and words, and above all, a spirit of brotherhood" (Preliminary Considerations to the Rule of the SSVP. Paris, 1835).

(4) The Vincentians gather as brothers and sisters in the presence of Christ, in Conferences that are real communities of faith and love, of prayer and action. It is essential that there be a spiritual and friendly bond among the Vincentian fellow members, as well as a common mission, which they develop together in order to help the poor and the marginal. It has to be considered that the whole Society is a single and true Community of Vincentian friends that spreads all over the world". (Art. 3.3. Rule SSVP).

(5) "The Vincentian vocation affects all the aspects of the daily life of the members, making them more sensitive and careful with their activities related with their families, job and leisure". (Art. 2.6 Rule SSVP).

ourselves when we justify them with the excuse of trying to seek a better service to the poor. The aspiration to a better service that so many times hides before our conscience the lack of understanding, is no other thing but the manifestation that we are not able to control and overcome our human passions.

Sometimes, it shouldn't be concealed, there is mistrust among us. Nonetheless, it is the trust in us and in every one what should dominate the relationship among the fellow members. When a fellow member joins a Conference, he should find a way towards a perfect life, which is the first aspiration of the Society toward its members (6). As well as it is impossible to conceive one of our groups without the aspiration to the improvement of its members, it should also be emphatically stated that the conflicts among fellow members predispose to exactly the opposite.

In the face of this kind of situations, second issue of this Letter, the work of the President of the Conference or Council is essential.

Undoubtedly, the first duty of a President at any level of the Society is to create a good atmosphere among the fellow members whose work he is guiding. There is in the Conferences, a task of guiding all the responsible ones at any level of the organization. That means: our Presidents are not only entrusted with the work toward the poor. At least, not only with that. The most important thing in the Society, in each of its Conferences and Councils, is the human potential in them and the spiritual path of perfection that a Conference should represent for every one of us (7).

The figure of the President is essential in the Society's life at any level of it. The Vincentian tradition says that a Conference or Council is often as devoted, good and responsible as is its President. As an acknowledgement of this central role of the Presidents in the Society's life

(6) "The Vincentians are called to walk together toward sanctity, because the true sanctity is the aspiration to a union with Christ in the love, which represents the essence of their vocation and the source of their inspiration. They seek to burn with love toward God as Jesus Christ taught and to deepen their own faith and loyalty" (Art. 2.2. Rule SSVP).

(7) "The Presidents at all the levels of the Society, following Christ's example, try to be servant leaders. They supply an encouraging environment in which the talents, capacities and spiritual charisma of the fellow members, are identified, developed and put at the service of the poor and of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. The Presidents have a special responsibility in the Conference or Council, which is to promote the Vincentian spirituality". (Art. 3.11 Rule SSVP).

from the outset, I transcribe part of the Circular of March 1st 1844, written by my predecessor and first General President of the Society, Emmanuel Bailly:

"As for the conditions that our Presidents should have, as should also have those in charge of other functions, do never forget the rule laid down by a pious adage. Neither the science on its own, nor the piety without further talents, is enough to know how to guide their brothers and lead God's matters. The mission of teaching concerns the minds rich in knowledge: "doctus est, doceat nos". Let those to whom God has granted the invaluable gift of piety pray much for their brothers: "pius est, oret pro nobis". Only the one that has in addition to obvious knowledge, the sincere practice of faith and a great spirit of reconciliation and prudence is called to be the servant of others and to lead the Christian works: "Prudens est, regat nos".

That is: if the fellow member we have entrusted with the leadership of the Conference or the Council is the appropriate one, undoubtedly the service given by the fellow members will be appropriate for their spiritual life in their service to the poor. Because of all this, it is very important that the President should pay attention to the coming up of difficulties in his Conference or Council, caused by some fellow members or Conferences to whom he will have to re-orientate in private. He should solve the problems arising among fellow members and not to overlook them thinking that either they are personal or they can be solved with time. On the contrary, he has to mediate with gentleness not free from firmness **and make all understand the kindness that the good and brotherly relationship among fellow members represents for the service to the poor and to us.**

The President's election is always essential for each Conference or Council, each fellow member having to meditate personally about whom he should choose (8), praying the Holy Spirit for help, and accepting the Lord's will when the elected one is not the candidate he would have

(8) "... he should also be characterized –he is thinking of the fellow members candidates to the Conferences' Presidency– by a warm affection to the Society, by a happy mixture of gentleness and firmness, by an enduring patience and finally, by a great zeal in favour of the spiritual and temporal good of the poor". (Jules Gossin, II General President, Circular of may 31st 1846).

wished. We should never leave the Conference or Council due to this lack of empathy with the majority of the fellow members because, at the end, who really loose are the poor and the very fellow member who is so imbued with his opinion. On the contrary, the Presidents should always find a sincere and close collaboration from all the members of the Conference. His service –the service of every President– has to be always understood, first of all, as in relation with all and every one of the fellow members.

The fellow members should always demand from themselves to choose the best as it has been mentioned above. Let be cautious. Nothing is more disastrous for the Conference and even for the elected person than to incline in favour of the youngest just for the fact of being young, or in favour of the one that seems more active. We will be disappointed more than once if we just follow these criteria. The youngest may be the best. The last arrived looking active and working hard, can also be the best. Wait. Observe this young person, how he devotes himself with missions that should not jeopardize the very life of the Conference. Observe the active one, how long he keeps this activity and what is the motif of it. Wait until you see and choose always the security of the fellow member that remains and that is able of great things without making a great fuss. Avoid the “bird of passage” that sometimes pays a visit to us and before whom our Conferences are often dazzled. Be cautious when electing who has the duty of helping us in our work of charity and in our spiritual growth.

Every one of our Presidents shouldn't forget that he guides with charity a group of people wishing to be good Christians, for whom he must be the guide and always an example. Our Presidents, at any level, should demand from themselves, a higher perfection, a larger formation, an on-going reflection on the problems of the Conference or the Council and a spiritual life that they are always trying to improve.

The third issue of this Letter, not less interesting for the fellow members, is to examine the relationships with the members of the Hierarchy of the Holy Church. We often receive enquiries at the head office of the General Council, asking for clarifications about the consideration they should have among us and about the place they are

entitled to in our Society, enquiries that not always come from fellow members, but also from priests and even from some Ordinary (9).

Above all, we have to understand that the following considerations do not only refer to the Deacons, Priests or Bishops, and that they should be applied to any member of the Holy Church belonging to an Institute of consecrated life, be they men or women, that obliges them to live in community or under a specific legal discipline. In principle all of them, in accordance to our tradition renewed by the experience through years, should be considered excluded from any representative service in the Society at any level. I.e. in any case, apart from very exceptional and justified circumstances always authorised directly by the very General Council, never as a general rule, they should be in charge at the Board of Conferences and Councils. They cannot be therefore, neither President nor Vice-Presidents, nor Secretaries nor Treasurers, at any level of the Vincentian Organization.

Nonetheless, we must have toward them a special consideration and always understand as a real grace their joining our works. Indeed, the presence of members of the Hierarchy among us, as another fellow member, certainly highly qualified, is an absolutely invaluable benefit. From the foundation of the Conferences, the presence of priests among us has always been constant. From the first Conference, the founder fellow members, established that the priests should have a place of honour in the Conferences and that, freeing them from the common management, they should always have their criterion listened to with the highest attention and their leadership in the spiritual matters of the Conference specially considered.

The founders of the Conferences wished with a magnificent criterion that the spiritual opinion of the priests for the Christian community that each of them is meant to be, could be listened to with interest and followed with a real desire of improving the interior life

(9) I refer the reader to Chapter 5 of the Rule of the Society: Relationships with the Hierarchy of the Church. In it, he will find the philosophy that has characterized the Society's action throughout more than one hundred and seventy years of life; and also to the International Statutes and to the Basic Requirements for the Superior Councils. All of them will serve as a consultation and will clarify the doubts that could arise in our relationships with the members of the Hierarchy of the Holy Church.

of all the fellow members, and in short for the interior life of the very Conference as a whole and, through the example of life given, of the people that is being helped.

The Parish Priests should find in the Conference of their jurisdiction, an on-going and efficient assistance in the apostolate of the parish charity. The Conferences should join enthusiastically all the initiatives in favour of the poor that take place in the Parish. Do not forget that no work of charity is outside the Society.

The Councils at any level should have the same consideration toward the Ordinaries. The Conferences should join the diocesan Pastoral of charity, with a real endeavour in that each Bishop find in the Conferences working in their Diocese, humble and efficient collaborators. It wouldn't be understood, and it could even be a cause of scandal before God's People, if a Council sought to keep initiatives differing with the ones meant by the Priest of the Diocese. Saint Vincent was very clear about this need that should be a peremptory obligation for us.

We Vincentians should dream, dream of new ways of tackling the human sorrow, the pain of living that goes far beyond the physical misery and need, and go and submit new projects to our Parish Priests and to our Bishops. We shouldn't remain in the inertia of the XiXth century assistance (10), so often criticized by the Hierarchy, but go beyond it and present initiatives, new initiatives, if I may be redundant, where lay people can relieve the pain and spread the Good News.

As I have pointed out in other occasions, the Conferences have the great responsibility as an organized and united group of taking the Good News (11), the news of the Holy Church, wherever there is sometimes a forbidden or difficult ground for the members of the Hierarchy. This is a kind of poverty typical of our present time and especially of the so-called "first-world

(10) "Members of all ages struggle to preserve the spirit of youth, which is characterized by enthusiasm, the capacity of adaptation and a creative imagination" (Art. 3.5. Rule SSVP).

(11) "Therefore, so that the mystery of the Lord's passion shouldn't be useless for us, we have to imitate what we receive and preach to others what we revere. Their request of justice would be hidden in us if the mouth doesn't utter what the mind believed. So that their request for justice wouldn't remain hidden in us, the thing to do now is that every one of us, in compliance with the measure of their vivification, should make the mystery known around him" (Saint Gregorius Magnus, Pope, about the book of Job).

countries", in which, I am sure, the Hierarchy would like us to work more than what we habitually do. Let us do it, let us put at their service this new attention to poverty and let's listen with filial attention their suggestions.

Finally, and regardless the matters dealt with in this Circular, let me remind all of you that the Gospel is published day by day in our web site, together with a meditation that we believe is especially appropriate for the fellow members. For those who don't know it yet, I encourage them to enter the page www.ozanet.org and make use of this new service of the General Council.

Dear friends, at the beginning of this Circular I was saying 'one year more'. Yes, one year more in which the good God has allowed the Conferences to live their service, service that will be greatly improved if all of us love each other more, that will be better organized if we find in our Presidents the "servant leaders" our Rule mentions and we respect them as such. It will serve as an ecclesial example if we are decided to insert this community service into the life of the Holy Church and to be willing to listen to our Priests and help them with the burden of guiding the whole Holy Church of Our Lord.

To this purpose, dear fellow members, we have to accept our individual limitations, our weak forces as a community and the smallness of the part we represent within the Holy Church. We are owed nothing. We are creditors of nothing. Only if we manage to overcome our passions, if we know how to get together with our brothers in the prayer, if we are aware of being the last children of the Holy Church, we will reach the true usefulness to which we were called: to tell the poor, with the imperfection of a life devoted to them, that God loves them, that we try to make every day closer to what the Evangelic Advice proposes to us.

For that, nothing is better than to resort to the Virgin Mary. She, the mediator of all graces, will undoubtedly grant us the personal improvement that we are seeking, with the example of the lives of Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam.

With my personal affection for all.

José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha
i.n.e.D.

XIV General President