

Paris, June 30th 2007

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

Dear friends and fellow members:

Return to God what belongs only to God

With the example of the Edict from Vatican Council II we have been reminded, and even more so as Christians we have been entrusted with taking up again the first forces that inspired and protected the strength of such church movements at their outset. It was a universal call to look into the forces that had inspired the beginnings of each movement and the Holy Church itself, so that from that time, from the intensity of that early age, we committed ourselves once more to serve the world in accordance with our own vocation. The Council intended for us to become detached from the superficiality that time had placed over the flowering movements that had once had set out their first aims.

For the Society, as well as for the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, this drawing nearer to our origins in order to recapture the first impulse and, later to examine the current position, reconsidering to what extent that historic moment in which we were living, is guided by them and how necessary and adaptable they were to a distant era at the very time of foundation.

In the 1970s the members were for the first time in a position where the Society proposed to revise the Rule – that in the Conferences, the intentions were very clear, as were the motivations that contributed to the original foundation. The same would occur with the revision of the Rule, which was achieved in October of 2003¹.

The first documents speak about the growing Society that, apart from the basis of solid friendship among the founders who met in order to help the poor carrying out and following evangelistic action, in particular, those people who were more familiar with the practice of Charity. That is, helping the poorest and doing so in a direct and personal manner, there is not the slightest doubt, nor the

¹ The present Rule of the Confederation and the International Statutes are available on the website of the Confederation at: www.ozanel.org.

merest shadow of this. They wished to help the poor, give testimony with their lives to the vitality of the Holy Church – not being satisfied with a simple intellectual defence of the Faith, in which they had been committed for years as members of the Society of Positive Studies² – and in whose mission (the defence of the Church) for so many times they had felt themselves failures. Their own search for the personal development of each member, the search for the personal sanctity of each person, fulfilled the desire of the founders – since their first meeting – to be obliged to surrender to the poorest, as previously mentioned.

They were also conscious of the pressing need of these same feelings, aspirations and efficacy, at the time they were being examined in that era of the 1970s. That is, they had not become dated. Friendship among members was and continues to be necessary – as well as the personal commitment of the members with the Church of the poor – with a desire to find themselves every day with their actions closer to return the love which we have been granted.

For all of this, it is important to keep a clear awareness of the reality that led to the foundation of the Society and how this came about. Fundamentally it is important due to what must have an influence on the daily life of the Society. If we speak of foundation – and with the practically unedited specialities in the Church's history in which they were produced – it is important to reflect about which person, or better still, which persons we can consider founder or founders of the Society. It is a long history concerning which I will try to draw up brief résumé.

We must remember that, in those first years of Conference life, the original members categorically refused to give themselves any personal merit for having founded the Conferences of St Vincent de Paul. They were sure that it was just a small piece of work beloved by God that had begun humbly,

² To deepen knowledge about the foundation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul I recommend the book "La Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, a memoir of the origins of the movement," by professor Charles Mercier, L'Harmattan Publisher, Paris.

and which, with the same humility, might disappear any day. They found it distasteful to claim any position of honour in the foundation since they all knew well how it had come about and in how great was the mysterious intervention of Divine Providence above all, and including, in some cases, the edge of the very will-power of the founders.

Only after the departure of Bailly from the General Presidency, and stimulated by his resignation letter of which one of the signatories was Frédéric Ozanam³ himself, was it accepted that Bailly could be considered in human terms as the true promoter and founder of the Society. The true "factotum" was the providential man without whom the Society would possibly never have existed as we know it today. Earlier commitments and the ups and downs of the turbulent history of France and of the Society at that time, led the Council General of that era to realize the need to grant the title of principal founder to Frédéric Ozanam ahead of Bailly himself. And this has continued until today and to such an extent has been accepted by the membership, who are in many places in the world and by many members who are unaware of the real truth of our foundation and who consider Ozanam the unique and exclusive founder⁴ of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul. This is a half-truth that notably impoverishes the life of the Conferences and their opportunities to act.

Because the truth is very different. The reality is that a single founder does not exist and apart from the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul and for this fact we should be amending our knowledge firstly and then subsequently our action. Knowledge of the historic truth and its consequences for the life of each of our Conferences should be turned into something of extraordinary importance. The requirements that this knowledge should affect each of our working groups in the world, will be vital to apply nowadays to the services of that first Conference, as we shall see later.

Actually, if we review the early facts which we have about our foundation, it will never be understood without the knowledge that it was Le Taillandier to whom the idea occurred of having a

³ Signatories of the Circular Letter were the two Vice Presidents of the Council General, one of whom was Frédéric Ozanam himself.

⁴ There are many countries in which the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is presented as having been founded by Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, without the least mention of the remainder of the co-founders, many of whom are mentioned in other parts of this Circular Letter, and who cannot be denied as being absolutely indispensable to the development of the Society.

meeting in order to help poor people⁵. The history of the Society will never be understood if we don't assume that it was Bailly⁶ who ensured the first steps of the growing association and possibly he was the one who made sure that the founders looked toward St. Vincent as their future patron⁷. The history of the Society will never be understood, if we do not recognise that the first Rule to be put in force was drawn up by Lallier – at the time Secretary General – and that Emmanuel Bailly⁸ wrote all of the Prologue. It will not be understood, if we don't understand and study in depth the contribution of Sister Rosalie Rendu to the early group, with the example and instruction of her good works as a faithful disciple of St. Vincent. In her, the first members once again found the figure of their Patron Saint. Nor would it ever be understood without the contribution of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and his clear thinking in the face of the first identity crises that confronted the Society in its early decades. Perhaps to him, Frédéric Ozanam, we owe, more than to any other of the original members, credit for having maintained the institution as an exclusively lay organisation. In no person, therefore, was the "exclusivity" of God for him to be considered as the unique founder. In accordance with what was believed in the decades prior to our foundation, as mentioned above, I firmly believe that Our Good Lord reserved this role for Himself and it is to Him that, simply, the title of Founder really belongs.

Without doubt, the Good Lord, through the action of the Holy Spirit, chose all those men, most of them extremely young, so that each of them, contributing the best of the talents they had been granted, were faithful instruments for the creation of a lay Institution that was to spread throughout the whole world⁹. Would some contribute more than others? Without doubt, but none of them, I repeat, really deserves the merit for having founded

⁵ The idea that was in the beginning firmly rejected by Lallier and Ozanam himself, who were inclined, at that time, towards the intellectual defence of the Works of the Church in history

⁶ "... he had the idea (referring to Bailly), with the aim of charity under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul, to unite a small number of young people..." (Circular Letter dated June 11, 1844, signed by the two General Vice Presidents: Ozanam and Cornudet and recorded by Secretary Baudicour).

⁷ He had good training, obtained in the Seminary of the Lazarist (Vincentian) Fathers with whom his family was very close, to the point of safeguarding valuable documents of the Congregation of the Mission during those turbulent periods in the history of France. A brother of Bailly himself, a well-thought-of priest named Paul, was at the point of being elected Superior General of the Congregation. It is also Bailly who put the first members under the caring custody of Sister Rosalie Rendu, for their formation in the practice of charity and how to accomplish, with love, contact with the poorest.

⁸ I refer to the Prologue to the Rule of 1835, the first with which the Society is endowed to govern itself.

⁹ Rule of the International Council of SSVF, Article 1.1

the Conferences of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul¹⁰. It is only God, who chose them to live the Gospel and to spread it among those in most need of justice and peace, who deserves the merit.

It is with regard to the "conference" form of their action in which the Holy Spirit intervenes and enlightens them on the way they are taking. This "conference" of Christian friends who strive to bring their love, to accept the mission as laymen within the Holy Church, is what is really important in our foundation alongside the men whom God had chosen to take the lead in human form.

That is to say, what is really important about the foundation is that the Good Lord has chosen a group of ordinary laymen, most of them students, so that through the charitable action of the Holy Spirit they learn how to listen to and understand and to create the humble work of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul that today are spread throughout the whole world.

Nevertheless, we have a permanent Foundation for today and for the future.

Having examined all of the above regarding our history, we should make a concerted effort to remain not simply in an intellectual exercise that this means, but rather: to see how it applies nowadays. That is: in the plan of our life which the Good Lord has for our Society, for each Conference and for each one of us who take part as individuals. Let us see!

When we are born, each one of us, however humble our origins have been and the positions which we occupy in our life, comes into the world as part of the Good Lord's plan in the History of Salvation. That is: none of us appears in this world without a purpose or without a profound reason going beyond the love with which our parents created us. For each of us, the Lord has plans, he endows us with certain gifts, granting us, at the same time, the possibility of accepting them or rejecting them. In His infinite goodness, He respects totally the freedom of each person, but, at the same time, He dreams that each one is capable of a discovery, of a commitment to the mission to which the person has been entrusted. This mission, no doubt, should always aspire to be guided by Love and accepted

¹⁰ According to tradition, it was the confrère Jean-Luc Le Prevost, the President of the second Conference to be created (that of St. Sulpice, in Paris), who suggested to the early Vincentians that they celebrate the festival of Saint Vincent de Paul. The aforementioned confrère, together with two others, founded the "Religieux" de Saint Vincent de Paul.

with the freedom that God himself gave us with His surrender, becoming a man for our sake.

Each Christian – every one of the Vincentians to whom I send once more this annual message – has to discover, in God's eternal time – for He is eternal – that this is what he wants from each and everyone of us in the period in which He has given us life. It is our time that we have assessed as valuable and that we can estimate.

However, there is no requirement that uniquely presents itself to each human being, considered as an individual. This obligation also applies to Institutions. This reaches into each of our Conferences. Indeed, if as stated above we have established the intervention of Our Lord in our foundation, we are to be absolutely sure that He has wanted and is waiting for a certain form of action for the Society at that time and also for the Society of today. He wants us to allow Him to act in each of our Conferences. If we repeat what was carried out by our founders and achieve a permanent foundation in each of our Conferences this will lead us to improve daily our service to the poorest of the poor and to our own members. It is these people who make up each of our Conferences. That is to say: we can live in a permanent foundation which is duplicated in each of our Conferences so that we can listen to what the Spirit wants of us at this time.

The Society, in each of our Conferences in its past, present and future, has been created for one historic moment. The Conferences have not been founded simply to tend to certain types of poverty. No! On the contrary, they have been created to adapt themselves to all types of areas of need and in each of them to find a suitable answer derived from love¹¹. They are timeless, they do not belong to a specific era, and because of that, as circumstances change in the world around us, we ourselves are to change and adapt to them.

Nevertheless, it is not always easy. It is not, basically, because we trust too much in our own strengths and we are not aware of the enormous wealth they represent and the methods our Foundation bring to us to which I have referred in the first part of this Circular Letter. It is here where we must observe faithfully what is most absolutely original in our foundation.

If the Conferences of those days knew how to adapt themselves to the circumstances that surrounded them, if they knew how to overcome the first

¹¹ Rule of the International Council of SSVV, Article 1.6

poverty they tended to, if they were capable of going to other poor people, such as the soldiers of those times who could not read, it was because they had above them the invaluable support of the Holy Spirit, with regard to the group which the members made up.

This "conference" spirit, of listening to one another, of everyone feeling called together to a single mission in which individual leaders did not exist, is the same as the one that should guide us today in our Conferences with meetings where all can contribute exactly what the Holy Spirit inspires at each moment. Some Conferences are ready to repeat the achievements of the first Conference in 1833 to listen to what the Good Lord desires of us today and to accept that He can inspire us through any of the members who make up a Conference.

Some Conferences are ready to understand that their mission is to listen to where the Spirit moves them and what challenges He inspires in them.

Some Conferences, when they meet, are inclined to forget about the ways and habits of the world; they forget the need and the desire for individual improvement. They forget to want what is always the right path¹², and on the other hand, listen to what the other members say. They forget that the mission of each of us is not always the most important missions achieved by the Conference, and that frequently we will discover, through careful listening, that at times the most humble people and those who express themselves most simply, are the ones closest to the truth, pointing to a true role, and a true challenge which on each occasion should concern and occupy the group of members.

If this group spirit is first sought and then managed with great care in each of our Conferences, in a short time the members will see their lives change and achieve a better service to those who are suffering most. The meetings will be of most use to everyone. Also, each of the members shall be enriched by what each one can contribute for the good progress of the Conference itself. They will be enriched through the action of the Holy Spirit as occurred at that first Conference.

It is a clear mission for Presidents, to whom I would recommend a careful re-reading of the second part of my Circular Letter of the 30th June

¹² "It is understood through personal self-denial (one of the virtues entrusted to the members) that without detachment from self, there can be no lasting Society." (Prologue of Rule of 1835)

2005¹³ in which I referred to characteristics of Presidents within the Society. Indeed, apart from the missions that in that letter were pointed out as proven in the best Vincentian tradition for the members who occupy such positions, these – the Presidents at whatever level – should continually exercise the job of authentic promoters of that group spirit within the Conference or Council they lead. This is not incompatible with an adequate exercise in the required and legitimate authority of each one of them. On the contrary, authority, understood as service¹⁴ as our Rule indicates, should always be ready to encourage the participation of all who attend the meetings and not only of those who are determined, at times, to put themselves centre stage.

We should assume that the call to the Holy Spirit that we make at the beginning of each of our meetings is real and effective and always receives a reply. If we do it in that way, if we usually try to find in each meeting what the Holy Spirit says to us through the group which our members make up, the charity provided by the Conference will be always and continually renewed. He will renew it, not us. It shall be a charity that adapts to the needs of the moment in which the life and atmosphere of the Conference is immersed and we shall be of more use to those who suffer. *We shall achieve a permanent foundation which means we should aspire to have always a place reserved at our meetings for the "Main Member," the true founder of the Society: The Good Lord Himself.*

No one was more obedient to the voice of the Holy Spirit than Mary¹⁵, our Mother, to whom our founders already prayed for assistance. May she show us how to achieve today, so that we also know how to say in each of our meetings, the "fiat" (a solemn command) in order that the Holy Spirit may inspire the group of which each of our Conferences in the world should form a part.

With my prayers and affection,

José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha
XIV President General
(I.N.E.D.)

OBTAIN NEWS, PROJECTS, BIOGRAPHIES,
ETC., AT: <http://www.ozanet.org/>

¹³ The Circular Letter referred to, can be found on the Society international website: www.ozanet.org

¹⁴ Rule of the International Council of the SSVP. Article 3.11

¹⁵ "...it is because of this that we have placed ourselves under the patronage of the Holy Virgin and St. Vincent de Paul, and we consecrate them to a special devotion and endeavour to follow in their paths." Prologue of the Rule of 1835.