

**CIRCULAR LETTER OF THE GENERAL INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT OF
THE SAN VICENTE DE PAÚL SOCIETY, ON THE OCCASION OF TAKING
UP OFFICE THE 27TH SEPTEMBER 1999, FESTIVITY OF SAN VICENTE DE
PAÚL**

Dear fellow members and brothers in Our Lord Jesus Christ:

In nomine Ecclesiae Dei

With holy fear of God, I appear today before you in the vincentin transfer of service, which is not different from the assumption of a charge in our dear “Conferences”. And I appear before you under the slogan which has given sense to my life and I will see to it that all of my decisions taken during the years I am at the service to which I was chosen by the vincentins of the world will be conform.

To spread the good news/Ecclesiasticity

The ultimate aspiration of our founders when they got together to found this society was to “keep up pure in their faith” and this one who we recognized as the main among them, reminded us at the end of his life that he hadn’t found the Truth out of the Church. If that –The Truth- is united to the Sacred Church, it

won't seem strange to you, this personal aspiration of acting "in the name of the God Church" that, on the other hand, has inspired the life of many of our fellow members who preceded us, beginning with our main founder, and who assumed themselves complete and responsible members of the Nation of God.

In this first message to the International Society of Saint Vincent of Paul to the world, I would like to explain what my main worries for the next six years are. Where, in my point of view, must be the keys for a good service to the Society which have effects on the life of the Sacred Church? Where must there be a service that is to the advantage of the poor?, which is the main objective of our association. Let me remember the second reading of the liturgy of the last month of February in the second Sunday of Lent:

"But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life- not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel..."

2 Timothy 1, 8b-10

Obviously, the Apostle, appeals to us to spread the good news, to evangelize the people. This news, the news of the salvation that we have received freely as a gift, is the most important activity of the Church and of our own Institution that approach his bi-centenary completely alive and in perpetual motion. So then, if the International General President of the Society should

worry about one thing, it should be in the very first place the collaboration to the extension of the Nation of God, the act of spreading the good news, essentially among the poor of the world.

To achieve this extension in the right way, the vincentins have to make an effort to be in a continuous formation process. This process will help us to know how to spread the message to the men, so that it will be adapted to the different situation and places

The need of individual and community prayer

And, to collaborate fully in this urgent and huge task, we have an absolute need, before everything, of prayer. The need of prayer, obvious in our Institution from its very beginning, has today an exceptional significance in a world which seems to be each day more believer but, however, less practising. A human being who has forgotten the need of ask, thank and praise God; definitely, of pray. We must struggle to recover this prayer and help the others to recover it. In this prayer, we will find the strength for our later action, which must be encouraged with the warmth of love. A prayer has to be in harmony and involved in the history of the time of the person at prayer. A contact with the Creator, which cannot and must not be only a simply dual relationship, even when this relationship is good. The contact must be full of the human suffering and of our co-responsibility, accepted in a free and voluntary way, to share the suffering of another. Full of our decision, encouraged with the strength of the prayer, of combating, proclaiming and winning those causes which are painful for our brothers. A prayer that takes us to a life in compromise with poverty, with

needs and against the new forms of exploitation that rise around us. A prayer that, firstly, leads us to help and avoid the suffering, and then, stimulates us to the personal compromise in the fight against the structures of the sin that surround us and to the prophetic proclaim when necessary. A need that we make ours, and that we share, from the faith in the Love of Jesus Christ and encouraged by Him.

Improvement in the social internationalisation

In second place, it is obvious that the General President takes care of all those things favouring the unity of action in the service to the poor, but at the same time, see to it that this unity does not become a non-desired uniformity.

The Society, extended in the world today in many and different nations, demands us to be attentive to what the Lord's Spirit is indicating. A world in which, thanks to the advance of the communications that make the contact between men easy, it is more and more difficult to serve if we do not pay attention to the necessary keys. These keys should orientate us in a tremendously complex and changing world. Since the fall of the real communism, and then the birth and consolidation of the European Union, the Free Commerce Treaty between the United States of America and Mexico, the awakening of the african nations, the Far East conflicts, and also those in some regions of Europe have to be meticulously inspected in the General Council, pursuing the best service to those who suffer. The Society and specially the General Council, cannot ignore all these new realities if we really want to serve our fellow members and the poor in the world. With the hope of serving the poor as a new key, must those who have formed the top of the International Service

of the Society necessarily open the way, prudently but inexorably, for other fellow members of other places in the world who really internationalize the means of service in the government of the Society, as our last General Assembly has demanded.

We must intend that our birth in this blessed french land, which all the vincentins must love and thank, will proceed historically as the Promised Land in which we will find someday the singular way of being faithful to our baptismal promises. But, at the same time, we must intend that the perception of the Society, from anywhere in the world, will be really international and not only european.

As a result, we will certainly have an administrative organization more decentralized and more complex than today. An organization that will be guided and for certain circumstances clearly defined, from anywhere in the world, far from Paris, our central international head office, and perfectly sintonized and synchronised with this city. I want The International Territorial Vice-Presidents to be in the future an important engine for this necessary changes.

In this search of an common action, in this “world as a village”, we know very well that we are not capable, with our strength and the present pattern of international service only, of serving the suffering humanity which we want “to enclose in a net of charity”. We have to look around and be conscious of how and with who we can go serving better the poor. I will return to this later.

Internal and external communication

We must put more effort into the communication sector to extend our service to the poor in this global world. In communicating, firstly between

ourselves, the fellow members; and then with the rest of the world: with those men and women, today strangers, but who, besides the fact of judging us, can someday take part in one of our "Conferences"

Our international newspaper "Vincepaul", full of good intentions and being representative of the effort of meritorious vincentins, has not the desired and necessary reach and regularity for an Institution as ours. One of our biggest defects, at least in the wide layers of our "Conferences" is its isolationism. But, when we talk about the internationalisation of our action, the suffering of the poor in the world to whom it is our duty to serve, we don't only feel the responsibility of taking part and being generous with them, but also with those who serve them.

The General Council must have a publication which inform the vincentins of the whole world about this international labour that requires the compromise of all the fellow members. Maybe we should renounce to a monthly publication because of its high price, but it is well worth the effort to publish the "Vincenpaul", at least two or four times a year, in the three official languages of the Society, even in a fourth language, the portuguese, due to the amount of members speaking this language, in a way to ensure the arrival of the information to the largest number of members possible.

If there already exist a problem of communication in the pure internal sphere, then this problem is even bigger facing the exterior, those who doesn't know us. Not always we could, and sometimes this even was a choice, make use of the means of communication that today, as I understand, are absolutely necessary for our activity, so as for knowing what a little group of christians can do with their personal effort surging as an answer to this belief, as well as for

appealing to the collaboration of others and with the object of having the own social activity considered with sympathy, extended and accepted and supported. The humbleness of the personal action of every vincentin must never be endangered according to our fundamental philosophy. Neither must it be confused with the informative treatment of the general data of our social activity, data which could facilitate the arrival of new members. New members which service would be a benefit for the poor. But even to themselves, spiritually, it would be a benefit making the answer to their baptismal obligations come true.

In the coming years, the Society will have to count with a communication-cabinet which will not only serve the General Council, but also will be at the disposal of the different National or Superior Councils.

Vincentins for peace

One of the dreams by which it is easier to me to be here, assuming this new vincentin service, is the old idea that I am sharing with you today and that, in the future and after consulting with the members of the General Council, I would be delighted if this would become a marvellous reality.

The Society, as a General Council, doesn't have today the power to help in the extension of the "Conferences" in the whole world, unless by enormous individual efforts which disappear sometimes after a few months for lack of vitality and problems in follow-up the new groups: It is not possible with the present means and structures to give to each new group the follow-up needed in the beginning.

In the General Council. We neither have the power for specific necessary actions in high-risk situations caused by natural disasters or situations of men who make other men suffering: wars, persecutions, etc.

As in any other international organization of our size, I think that the Society needs some fellow members, men and women, who get involved in the “Conferences” in definite periods and to live for them, freed and ready to go helping anywhere in the world.

To go helping where needed. Sometimes, to create the “Conferences” where they still don’t exist, so, for the extension; and sometimes, to collaborate in the consolidation of the new groups that are arisen. But also, to collaborate with those National Councils that have suffered the disgrace of natural disasters or wars. We need units of people that set in motion little specific development plans with new “Conferences” which serve the country, and who return later to consolidate what they created.

This fellow members could really be called “Vincentis for peace”. I hope that in the near future I could introduce this idea and its development to the General Council.

Extension of the Society

This development should be accompanied by a serious and severe planning of working for the extension of the Society I mentioned before. Our dear “Conferences” are enough extended in more than the sixty per cent of the countries in which we are introduced. According to the data that the Fatima Assembly facilitated to the General Council Secretariat, in 83 of the 128

countries mentioned in this report, the number of “Conferences” they are having is 50 or less.

If we are really persuaded of the goodness that to us has meant a life in the community of our own “Conference” and if we are really convinced of the pain of the others which it is our duty, we cannot accept that, for lack of capacity of our structures, this physical and spiritual benefit doesn’t reach a higher number of people. The General Council should provide the right tools to constantly create the “Conferences” and to enlarge the beneficent action of the vincentin movement day after day in quantity and quality.

Vincentin family

I have talked above about the fact of “looking around and being conscious of how and with who we can go serving better the poor”. Let me say something about this.

Obviously and in first place, the Vincentin Family is by our side. We wanted to be a part of it. We have to work with this family and make our relationship stronger throughout the next years. Not in a exclusive way, impeding the necessary and enriching collaboration with other Institutions. I think that it is very important to denote this non-exclusivity. The correct way is one of priority collaboration which will facilitate our common charisma of dedication to the poor.

The people in charge of the main vincentin Institutions, our brothers, are yet getting together for years. But it is also true that these meetings have little response in the basis of our respective organisations. There does not, or only on a small scale, exist the so desired common projects or collaborations. That is

the reason why I apply to all these organisations asking that on the occasion of a next meeting, the subject would be how to promote little activities in the basis of each of our organizations. May we obtain that the necessary collaboration that the Vincentians feel in the liturgical celebrations must also reaches those who we want to serve intensively: the poor.

Ecumenical collaboration

We also have to collaborate, as the Holy Church demands, in the improvement of the challenge of ecumenism. Fortunately for this Society, always willing to serve the human being, it is not only about fulfilling the compromise with the ecclesiastical authorities, but also about facing, in a generous way, the needs of the different parts of the Vincentian world. The recent General Assembly held in Fatima demanded as to keep on improving in this way. So, we have to be ready to make room for those situations in our Organization and it will only work after a reform of the Rule.

The reform of the Rule

The General Assembly asked us for this reform as well as the request of a logo, an hymn and a flag.

The Fatima Assembly, dear fellow members, was really demanding with who, from this moment on, are going to serve the "Conferences" on an international scale. There, those who come, have the feeling of a non-frontier Society that, undoubtedly, wishes to be taken this way and is making its daily motion according to this. I talked about it at the beginning of this report: the Society wishes to be international and not only European. It wants to spread out

to new realities which obtain the same power that the european postulate in the routine of the “Conference’s” international mouvement. All this has to be included in the new Rule that, in my point of view, has to be deeply reorganized, and above all, in everything that has to do with the organisation, namely, the parts II and III.

The one dedicated to the working of the National or Superior Council should impose a certain uniformity on what is essential for all the countries in the world; and afterwards, on an individual level and when the circumstances are asking for it, we should take account of the necessary nuances.

The one dedicated to the working of the General Council, the third part, should be reconsidered in detail after examining the needs occured during all these years of working since the approval of the Assembly of Dublin.

And this must happen, starting from the moment the International General Council was potentated as an authentical platform of debate and regulation together with the International General President. The Society may not continue to waste the richness that its multiracial composition will adduce in its debates for a better direction of the international subjects. Undoubtedly, this will impose that our future Rule, in this III part, must plan more frequently meetings of this organ, which must help the General President in the guidance of the whole Society.

I would like to announce that, in this domain of the organisation, I will organize again the service in the chairmanship of the spanish “Conferences”.

The corresponding parts of the whole world and you all, dear brothers, will understand that there are important reasons of service oblige me to do this. Nevertheless and while I have this clear obligation, it is not less certain that maybe in a decision taking by force of certain circumstances, we may find experiences that are not negligible for the future. A General President who lives outside Paris, our head office, needs an infrastructure in the place he lives. And this is not always possible with the humble means of the Society. This obligatory experience of fitting in both services which are indicated above, may illuminate us in future situations and services of the General Council.

Fraternizations/Finances

The funds for fraternizations are very demanded by the little countries and at the same time the present control for their distribution and the follow-up of their use is put into doubt. This funds will require us a huge organizational effort during the next years. The Society must continue to amplify this wonderful way of sharing between the ones who most have and the ones who practically miss everything. But this must be done with realism and seriousness. We cannot eternally suspect the administration of the funds. We will have to create mechanisms which assure and give confidence, concerning their correct and rational administration, to all of our fellow members and Councils.

The financial rationalization which implies what I mentioned above concerning the fraternizations is similar to the one needed for the support of the general structure of the General Council. The Society cannot and must not continue to support a structure which superates its financial possibilities. The General Council may not end all of its exercises one after the other, with an

operative deficit and consider this absolutely normal, because it isn't and we must say so.

It is a fact that an immense majority of the countries where the Society is located are poor, just as the Society itself who is inconvenienced in them. It is also true that those countries who lack means, are the ones that apply most for services and help at the General Council. We must be realistic. I assure you that we will make the necessary effort during the next year to adapt the financial situation of the Council to its real needs. But if, at the end, we come to the conclusion that there isn't enough intention of collaboration between the countries with major economic possibilities to help their most poor brothers in all ways, in that case I will propose a central administration that is much more little and adapted to our real possibilities. It would hurt all of us, but we would really know what we are standing for and which means we can't count on.

Designations

All of these interests here declared will be the dominant element in the designations I will achieve at the end of this year, concerning the group of fellow members that will occupy the different international services of our Society. I will take care to let the Permanent Section, as well as the future International Executive Committee the Fatima Assembly asked for, represent as well as possible the enormous cultural differences that make all the richness of this Institution.

Concerning the vice-president, I don't think that the Society must maintain the composition of the present Council-Table because it does not define clearly the prime International General vice-president. On the contrary, I would like to communicate to all the "Conferences" and Councils of the world that I entrust the service to the Society of prime International General vice-president to our brother Joseph Mueller, fellow member of the United States. I pretend, dear friends and brothers, that the vice-president has concrete delegations. In that way and from now on, I commit the concern for the fraternizations mentioned above to his care, in the way that from now on, he guides the whole process of these fraternizations and, at the same time he creates the guidelines that will inspire the future exchanges, after having submitted them to the International Executive Committee and the Permanent section.

Today, I will not announce more designations than the one I did for the International General Vice-president and I will confirm the position of all the vincentins to whom my predecessor entrusted certain services, until the indicated date of 31st december. I thank all of them in advance for their collaboration.

In order to fulfill as soon as possible the request of the General Assembly referring to the reform of the Rule, I will entrust to a little international commission to start working on this and to organize a contest for our logo. The International Commission for the reform of the Rule which will meet under the presidency of the International general President, will be composed by the

three General Presidents that preceded me, and a young fellow member and an older one, if approved. The experience that the General exPresidents have in governing the Society must not be wasted. To entrust them matters purely executives would be showing disrespect for charity. Not using the experience accumulated during so many years of service to the Society would be a regrettable waste. By adding to this commission a young fellow member in order to represent the future to which we pretend to serve as well as an older fellow member, I am sure that we will really obtain to fulfill what the Assemblu asked us for, respecting the tradition and looking in a serene way to the future.

The former International General President

On this occasion, I cannot avoid considering myself as the representative of the Society and I will dedicate some words to my predecessor as surely so many vincentins in the world would like to do. Dear Cesar, you were called and you came. During this six years you gave the best of you to the Society. You travelled all over the world and you assumed, on many occasions in absolute solitude the difficulties and anguish that a service as the one you leaves undoubtedly brings along. You initiated a tough way, the way of a General President non-resident in Paris, a way that contained a lot of risks because of a lack of social experience. Thank you for your dedication and your audacity.

Between us, between vincentins, we are used to having God recompensing us for the little or the many things that we, in all our humbleness have been able to give to the poor. None the less, I believe that the Lord who claims us fraternal courtesy, also would be delighted to see how we love each

other and how we are grateful for the services rendered through the love for His Name and for His most genius representatives.

You couldn't have achieved this service, dear President Viana, without the company, closeness, understanding, fraternal help, etc. of your entire family who, during these years, has had a little less husband, father and grand-father in order to enable the whole Society to enjoy you. As representative of all those who surely regretted intimately your withdrawal, let me, in the name of all the vincentins of the world, to address to Enriqueta my personal gratitude and the gratitude of the whole Society. To your wife who has been a double fellow member in her commitment during the years of your international service. Thank you, dear friend.

Final request to my loved brothers

And finally, dear fellow members, please allow me to address to all of you a signal of hope. It is said that we are one of the first catholic organisations of the world. It's possible. In fact, we are. But what is important and what is really essential is that the world needs us, each of us. The world needs our good work, our evangelist spirit, our gentleness, our generous commitment. Convince yourself that we arrived, each of us, to this fraternal and enjoyable meeting, to the bosom of the "Conferences" by the direct call of our Lord, and with the vocation of acting as buffer whenever there exists tension between men, in the way our principal founder taught us. Convince yourself about the importance and need of the individual action of every one of you. Not only the action executed in the bosom of the very "Conference" or in its name, but also

of all the ones that must always be reforced by our belonging to this Society. In familiar, social and professional relationships and in every action undertaken during our life, the spirituality and the charisma that we found in our fraternal group of the “Conference” must be reflected. In all these, the Lord, who is the “Main member” of our humble Institution, expects of us that the vincentin charisma is revealed, is brought to life and is made effective, as well in the little as in the big things of the daily life.

We also must bring the hope and the strong will of our humble service to the images of Christ to all of them, to all our relationships. These images that go with us every day without realizing it and which we have to feel ambassadors and representatives in view of the whole world.

Dear friends and fellow members: the only reliance to assume the change you lied in my hands consists in my uselessness as a slave, in my strong belief in the truth of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Lord,
you establish peace for us;
all that we have accomplished you have done for us.

Isaiah 26,12

In the reliance that we cannot do anything just by ourselves, that we receive everything from He whjo created us, please allow me to entrust to your prayers this service I start today and I embrace all of you in the love of Maria,

applying for the intercession of Saint Vincent of Paul and the Blessed Federico Ozanam.

Paris, head office of our fondation, the 27th September 1999

José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha
XIV International General President
of the Saint Vincent of Paul Society