



# **VINCENTIAN FORMATION**

**A**

**FOUNDATION DOCUMENT**

**OF THE**

**SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL**

Approved by Board of Trustees  
National Council of the United States  
Society of St. Vincent de Paul  
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# INTRODUCTION



## Vincentian Formation

**A Foundation Document  
of the  
Society of St. Vincent de Paul**

The purpose of this document is to provide the underlying assumptions, vision and structure for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul's formation process. The document is intended primarily for those individuals and groups at the local and National Council levels who have responsibility for formation and education.

Integral to this effort is an understanding and ability to implement organizational formation and servant leadership throughout various levels of the Society.

The emphasis in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul on formation and education stems from the grassroots membership of the Society's response to God's call of grace and articulates the desire of Vincentians throughout the United States to engage in a process of formation, education and training in order to advance in holiness of life with the hope to better serve those who are in need.

## **VISION STATEMENT**

Formation is an ongoing process that begins with one's conception into life and continues throughout life. Formation is multi-dimensional and affects one's whole being, body, mind, and spirit (I Thes 5:23). One's formation is influenced by all of the socio-historical, cultural, philosophical, educational, and religious traditions that provide the context for one's growth and development. Indeed the story of one's life as a person, as a Christian, and as a Vincentian is an ongoing process of graced formation, reformation, and transformation into Christ-likeness.

Vincentian Formation takes into consideration the initial and ongoing process of growing and developing in the tradition, spirit, and spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul, patron of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and Blessed Frederic Ozanam, its founder. This process respects that those who seek membership have already received some formation, both as a person and as a baptized Christian. The Society offers spiritual formation -- formation that assists one to find meaning and purpose in life, love and a sense of relatedness -- both in its initial orientation and in its ongoing formation. Spiritual formation assists both the Society and the individual member to achieve the three essential elements of the Society: personal holiness, service of the needy and friendship.

## **PROCESS**

The Process presented here for Vincentian Formation serves as a foundational document for all formation and education in the Society in the United States. It is an implementable, adaptable, and evaluative structure and process.

The implementation of the Process has a two fold desired outcome: 1) to invite all Vincentians to appreciate and celebrate their authentic identity and mission; 2) to renew and revitalize the Society in the United States as a whole and individual Vincentians in particular.

## KEY ASSUMPTIONS OF FORMATION

Formation, in general, is the continuation of Jesus' own work with the apostles: "those sent out." See Mark 3:13-15

- Formation is a process of becoming.
- Formation, in the words of St. Paul, as echoed by St. Vincent de Paul, is to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." See Romans 13:13-14
- Formation, initial and ongoing, are closely linked and should become one organic journey of Christian being and living.
- Vincentian Formation is rooted in a specific call to holiness. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Therefore, he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor." Luke 4:18
- The Church on earth is by her nature missionary. Vincentians are therefore evangelizers. "The witness of a Christian life and good works done in a supernatural spirit have great power to draw men to the faith and to God." AA 6.2
- The vocation to holiness is rooted in the Sacrament of Baptism.
- The Sacrament of Confirmation associates us more closely with the mission of the Church and helps us bear witness to the Christian faith in words accompanied by deeds. See CCC #1316
- Vincentians are called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity. See Lumen Gentium #40
- The Holy Spirit is the principal agent in one's spiritual life. The Spirit creates one's "new heart," and inspires and guides it with a "new law" of love that is pastoral charity.
- Pastoral charity is "the virtue by which the Vincentian imitates Christ in his self-giving and service." It is not just what the Vincentian does, but his/her gift of self. Pastoral charity determines one's way of being, thinking, acting, and relating to people, especially to those who are poor and in need. Pastoral charity makes special demands on a Vincentian.
- Vincentians witness God's love by embracing all works of charity and justice.



## **SECTION I**

**A. THE FOUR MAJOR AREAS OF FORMATION**

**B. CORE VALUES AND VIRTUES FOR VINCENTIANS**

# **A. THE FOUR MAJOR AREAS OF FORMATION**

## **1. HUMAN FORMATION**

Human formation is the basis for all formation. Ordinarily human formation is thought of as one's "natural" side as contrasted with one's "spiritual" side. However, what makes a person distinctively human is the spiritual dimension. Within each person is a dynamic called a transcendence dynamic which calls us to "go beyond" and to realize the spiritual dimension. Realizing the "more than" or spiritual dimension is the work of grace.

Vincentians respond to the call to serve the poor in the Society with their human personalities and character development. The process of initial and ongoing graced formation assist Vincentians to become more of a bridge rather than an obstacle for others in their service.

Vincentians cultivate a series of human qualities needed to be people of balance responsibilities and willing to be formed to greater love, to truth telling, to loyalty, to respect, to integrity, to justice and compassion.

Vincentians are urged to avoid arrogance, quarrelsomeness and to be affable, hospitable, sincere in words and heart, prudent and discreet, generous and ready to serve, capable of opening themselves to clear and friendly relationships and encouraging the same in others, quick to understand, forgive and console. See 1 Timothy 3:1-5; Titus 1: 7-9

Vincentians are called to affective maturity that presupposes awareness that it is love that plays a central role in becoming spiritually mature. See Redemptoris Hominis #10

## **2. SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

The human person exists within a field of relationships. At the center of this field is the Divine. For the Christian, the Divine is spoken of as The Blessed Trinity, the Father, the Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Made in God's image, each of us is called to live in communal relationships with each other. Each person is related to their immediate, current life situation, to others, and to the wider world. Each person is affected by and affects all of these relationships. Thus each person both gives and receives from each of the poles of this field of relationships in an ongoing way.

As a person grows and develops, he/she becomes more or less receptive to the human and divine directives that emanate from each of their relationships. Events that are “formative” may assist the person to “open” up to the inner spiritual or transcendent dimension that may have been asleep. Gradually through the awareness of God’s grace the person may grow spiritually. Certain attitudes, such as the attitude of “awe,” nourish the person’s continued growth. Certain graces, such as Faith, Hope, and Love serve to build foundational dispositions in the person that assist in ongoing transformation.

A key understanding in spiritual formation is that both the reason and will are exercised on both a functional pre-transcendent (natural) level and a transcendent (supernatural) spiritual level. The end of spiritual formation would have the Divine experienced in a relationship of knowing and loving that is from a transcendent level. The transcendent level of relationship with the Divine moves the person from a control mode to a disposition of surrender. Spiritual living calls the human person to continued conversion from seeking one’s own will to surrender to God’s will.

Spiritual practice such as prayer and meditation, spiritual reading and study, and the spiritual disciplines nourish spiritual living. One’s religious belief and adherence to the teachings and practice of the Catholic Church assists the balanced practice of the spiritual disciplines. The Liturgy and the Eucharist is the summit and source of the spiritual life for the Vincentian. Service to others assists one to grow in generosity, selflessness, and ultimately experiencing the Divine in the other. Rather than attempting to control God, one finds and serves God in everyday events and activities. This latter is the true call of the Vincentian: to experience God in the ordinary activities of daily life.

### 3. INTELLECTUAL FORMATION

A Vincentian is first and foremost a believer. It is faith, hope, and love that bring about a personal relationship between the believer and Jesus in the Church. Spiritual formation includes both intellectual formation as **information** and **formation** of the human heart. We identify intellectual formation as the process of increasing one’s knowledge of the teachings of the faith tradition. As such, intellectual formation is based and built on the study of theology. True theology proceeds from the faith and aims at leading to the faith.

In addition, intellectual formation is also concerned with **how** the faith tradition is formed, reformed, and transformed in the person through grace. Here we distinguish the **faith tradition** from the **form tradition**. This distinction accounts for the diversity of expressions of the faith tradition. While there is one Catholic faith teaching, there are many forms of both receiving, practicing, and witnessing to one’s faith.

Therefore, the goal of intellectual formation is the conversion of both mind and heart through understanding and appreciating the words and deeds of Jesus.

Education is certainly a category of intellectual formation. We view skill development and informational input as educational. Vincentians learn “how-to,” best practices, best projects, for improving service to those in need.

#### **4. MINISTERIAL FORMATION**

Pastoral formation has to do with two essential realities for the Vincentian: **mission** as **service** and **relationship** that results in **communion**. The Vincentian mission is service of those who are needy. The service of the needy is founded upon and nurtured by one’s relationship with Jesus. Ministerial formation focuses the Vincentian on communion with the charity of Jesus. Indeed all formation for the Vincentian aims at nurturing one’s ever growing relationship with Jesus so that it is truly a communion. The Vincentian mission of service is ultimately fueled by the depth of his/her relationship with the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The relationships of communion within the Society of one Vincentian with another is a mutuality of seeing Jesus in the community of the members as well as those we serve.

Ministerial formation is more than concerned with service. The Vincentian grows in his/her appreciation of being a witness of the charity of Jesus “who went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). The Vincentian comes to see that he/she is a visible sign of the solicitude of the Church as mother, father, and teacher. The Vincentian continues to develop his/her ministry with a community spirit, in heartfelt cooperation with others. He/she recognizes and celebrates the different gifts and charisms of the members of Christ’s Body. This demands mutual trust, patience, gentleness, understanding and reliance.

Aware of the essential missionary nature of the Church, the Vincentian is open and available to all possibilities offered for service as an expression of the Church’s mission and the proclamation of the gospel.

The goal of ministerial formation, therefore, is to prepare oneself with a comprehensive pastoral outlook, ready to assume duties that one’s call from God to service requires. This may include formation for servant leadership.

## B. CORE VALUES AND VIRTUES FOR VINCENTIANS

### 1. HUMAN FORMATION

In service to those who are poor and in need, the Vincentian strives to acquire those values and virtues that will enhance his/her call to ministry. These qualities promote a **balanced person**, one of the outstanding characteristics of Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

The Vincentian cultivates a **respect for the life and dignity of every person**. Every person is sacred and this recognition is a matter of Catholic social teaching.

Vincentians work for **justice** in imitation of their founder, Frederic Ozanam.

The Vincentian strives to acquire the **spirit of loyalty, cordiality, and hospitality**—qualities referred to in depth in the Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

As Frederic Ozanam was passionate for truth and a man of his word, so his followers are **people of integrity**.

Finally, Vincentians strive to be **flexible, open, and non-judgmental**.

### 2. SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The special call from God to be a Vincentian is an invitation to respond to personal spiritual growth in a communal relationship with others to serve the poor in alignment with the spirit and example of St. Vincent de Paul, patron of the Society, and the founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam. Both the patron and founder provide spiritual direction for ongoing formation with the following convictions:

- Vincentians strive to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, desiring to live intimately with God.
- Vincentians seek to place Jesus, Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor, as the center of their lives and ministry.
- Vincentians understand that prayer, the reading of God's Word, the Holy Eucharist, and ministry, are significant means for assisting them to maintain awareness of God's presence. Vincentians are women and men of prayer.
- Vincentians hold a high priority for the Eucharist, seeing the Eucharist as the summit and source of their lives
- Vincentians are continuously growing as people of compassion and love—the charity of Jesus Christ.

- Vincentians remember the teaching of Vincent: “There is no charity that is not accompanied by justice.”
- Vincentians strive to make their own the core values of the Society as enumerated in the Manual. They also strive to strengthen the distinguishing Vincentian virtues of simplicity and humility.
- Vincentians invoke the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, often in their lives. Specifically they pray for the intercession of the Spirit before and during home visits.

### **3. INTELLECTUAL FORMATION**

The Society was founded on the challenge to put faith into practice. This challenge means that faith must continuously be renewed through knowledge of the teachings of the Church. Frederic Ozanam, as founder of the Society, provides the Vincentian with an example of a life dominated by the sacred fire of faith and solid orthodoxy. The Church was one of his true loves. In concert with the founder, Vincentians:

- Desire to understand their faith and the teachings of the Church.
- Strive to appreciate the words and deeds of Jesus, their model and exemplar
- Understand that intellectual (mind and heart) formation is a dimension of spiritual formation and strengthens spiritual integration.
- Desire education and training, not for their own personal enhancement alone but to improve their skills in serving others in their ministry.

### **4. MINISTERIAL FORMATION**

In concert with the patron and founder of the Society, Vincentians have heard and responded to a call to communion with Jesus and to service of the poor. The content and process of pastoral formation stresses that Vincentians

- Understand that ministry or service is a means for holiness. They want to be witnesses of the charity and justice of Jesus in whatever they do.
- See all formation as preparing them for communion with Jesus, Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor.
- Want to be visible signs of the solicitude of the Church to the poor-the preferential option of the Church, of themselves, and of their patron and founder.
- Strive to be open and available to meet the needs of all. They are interested in the best practices and special projects of others, especially Vincentians.
- Be willing and open to practicing the principles of servant leadership in all levels of the Society.



## **SECTION II**

**OBJECTIVES AND ROLES  
OF  
LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE  
FOR  
VINCENTIAN SERVICE**

## **RECOMMENDED OBJECTIVES AND ROLES OF LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE FOR VINCENTIAN FORMATION**

In order to affect Vincentian Formation, it must be embraced as a ministry. In addition, to be most effective, certain roles of leadership corresponding with Council structures seem critical. These roles constitute a ministerial infrastructure that we believe is necessary to sustain a healthy Council practice of Vincentian Formation.

The following seven objectives highlight four key roles:

- The **Council President** and other Council leaders
- The **Formation leader** who becomes the lead agent in promoting and supporting this ministry in the Council
- The **Formation committee** who collaborates with the leader in planning and providing learning opportunities
- **Formators**

While it is agreed that the whole Council is responsible for formation ministry, these four leadership roles are critical lead agents. The following section describes these roles, introduces the objectives to be accomplished, and proposes indicators to help in assessing attainment of the objectives. Objectives and indicators are based upon successful practice. They are meant as guides for enhancing and expanding effective Vincentian formation, and they can be adapted to local needs and circumstances.

## **Objective One: The Role of the Council President and Council Leaders**

**The Council President and other Council leaders will demonstrate a clear commitment to the vision and practice of on-going growth in Christian faith and the Vincentian vocation.**

The Council President bears the responsibility for the Rule and Spirit of the Society in the Council and for ensuring an authentic presentation of the Rule and Spirit of the Society. He/she personally models the Rule and Spirit and is its principal advocate in the Council. He/she sees to it that Vincentians of all ages have opportunities to learn and grow throughout their lives. Experience bears out that the quality of formation in a community depends very largely on the presence and activity of the Council President.

Note: In Councils with paid staff, the President ensures that all staff members promote formation as a Council priority and ensures that formation opportunities are provided.

### **Key Indicators:**

- **Established Council policies and procedures that give priority to the vision and practice of Vincentian formation such as: Council budget funds, staffing, training, and resourcing for formation to the fullest extent possible; multiple forms of ongoing formation are available.**
- **Paid staff members promote and support the formation of Vincentians, and they encourage all Vincentians to participate in basic and ongoing education.**
- **The Council place formation at the center of its stated mission and goals, and it promotes the importance of formation at every opportunity.**
- **The Council gives formation a priority in the allotment of financial resources, in providing learning space, and in event scheduling.**
- **The Council helps to provide access to various available learning resources and opportunities for Vincentians such as a library. Councils connect Vincentians to the resources of the larger Society, such as neighboring Councils, appropriate programs provided by Catholic or secular colleges, night schools, etc.**

## **Objective Two: The Role of the Formation Leader**

**Each Council President will appoint a formation leader, authorized by the Council and personally involved in ongoing formation, to assume primary responsibility for implementing the ministry of Vincentian Formation.**

Each Council needs a prepared lead agent to take hands-on responsibility for effectively establishing the overall learning context and programming in the Council. This person may be a member, a paid staff or a volunteer Vincentian prepared for leadership in this ministry. While the position may be a full-time salaried, it could just as well be filled by a person who donates his or her time for a few hours a week. What is important is that the person have or acquire a formation vision and competency, be formed by the word of God, and be well versed in and comfortable with current documents. This leader will possess the time, energy, and commitment to direct the formation of the Council.

If the designated leader is a staff person, adjustments may be needed in job description so as not to shortchange the amount and quality of time and energy they can devote to Vincentian formation.

If the formation leader is not a paid staff member, he/she reports to the Council President, so as to assure a cohesive Council ministry.

### **Key Indicators**

- **The Council President appoints a formation leader: a spiritual advisor -- a paid staff person or qualified volunteer Vincentian. The Council makes every effort to provide the leader suitable formation in the Rule and Spirit of the Society, educational skills, and an understanding and ability to apply spiritual direction in both a formative and informative manner.**
- **The leader advocates for and gives direction to the primacy of formation in the Council with the guidance and support of the Council President and staff.**
- **The leader promotes the development of an effective Formation Committee. The leader acts as a bridge connecting the formation committee, the staff, other Council groups, agencies, and service organizations.**
- **The leader works with other Council ministries to promote cohesive, effective formation programming. The leader helps every ministry, program and activity realize its full formation potential.**

## **Objective Three: The Role of the Formation Committee**

**The Council will have a core committee of Vincentians committed to and responsible for implementing the Council vision and plan for formation.**

Providing effective, diverse formation opportunities is a demanding responsibility requiring the collaborative efforts of a well-trained, coordinated committee, a nucleus of mature Vincentians, committed to the Society. Clearly, no person acting alone can adequately meet the needs and fulfill the potential of formation ministry. Comprised of 3-10 members, the committees' role is consultation, planning, and program implementation for formation in the Council, working with the formation leader.

### **Key Indicators:**

- **The Council has a functioning Formation Committee that is formally recognized in the Council leadership structure and with clear operating procedures and lines of accountability.**
- **The Formation Committee, working with the President and staff, formulates a vision of formation for the Council. The committee works collaboratively with the formation leader to identify the principal spiritual and human needs of Vincentians, discern learning possibilities inherent in those needs and draws upon its knowledge of the Council, its history and culture, and studies relevant church documents and available research on Vincentian formation.**
- **The Committee identifies elements of Vincentian life that foster growth in faith, assesses their impact, and if necessary, offers recommendations to enhance their effectiveness.**
- **The Committee provides a diverse range of quality programming for Vincentian formation.**
- **The Committee receives both initial and ongoing formation to prepare it to accomplish its mission effectively. The formation leader sees that the committee receives both initial orientation and ongoing formation, so that they grow in personal spirituality, love for Christ, and knowledge of the principles and methods of effective formation.**

## **Objective Four: The Role of the Formator**

**Each Council will utilize trained formators to serve the diverse formation efforts of the Council.**

The formator as the person who actually engages the learners is responsible for either directly presenting some facet of Vincentian formation or as a guide or catalyst to learners as they seek to deepen their ministry and faith. All aspects of the formation of formators must be centered on Jesus Christ, and the effective communication of the Vincentian charism. They must be people of faith with an evangelizing spirit and a commitment to ongoing formation. Not only do they need to be people who know their subjects but also need to have the competence to animate a shared journey with others, the ability to relate authentic Catholic faith to real life circumstances, the ability to lead Vincentians in prayer, and the craft to integrate divergent tendencies into the full faith and life of the Society.

### **Key Indicators:**

- **Each Council has access to well prepared formators for Vincentian formation. The National Council provides assistance in the formation of formators and in helping Councils share qualified formators.**
- **Councils provide recognition for their formators and find assistance for their formation.**

## **Objective Five: The National Vision of Vincentian Formation**

**The National Council will have a clearly stated vision of ongoing formation.**

### **Key Indicators:**

- **The National President acts as a consistent advocate for the centrality of Vincentian formation and as chief formator of Vincentians. He/she puts into operation the necessary personnel, means, and equipment, and also the financial resources to promote and sustain a real passion for Vincentian formation.**
- **The National Council gives clear priority to the formation of Vincentians by highlighting and affirming the centrality of Vincentian formation in the ministry of the Society.**
- **The National Council has in place a plan for formation that has been formed in consultation with National leaders. This plan guides activities.**

- **The National Council works collaboratively to advocate for a comprehensive integrated ministry of formation at the Council and Conference level. Through coordinating their plans and objectives, offices avoid duplicating services and unhealthy competition.**

### **Objective Six: The National Plan and Strategy for Vincentian Formation**

**The National Council will have a clear strategy for developing Diocesan/District or local Council formation leaders, committees, and formators.**

A primary role of the National Council is to affirm the priority of Vincentian formation and to provide leadership, personnel, services, and resources to assist Councils in developing that ministry. It is crucial that Councils have reliable assistance from their National Council in forming Council leadership, committees, and formators.

#### **Key Indicators:**

- **The National Council builds community and connections among Council formation leaders, and it provides for their ongoing formation and support.**
- **The National Council supports Council formation committees in various ways.**
- **The National Council offers formation opportunities for formators.**

## **Objective Seven: National Support for Vincentian Formation**

**The National Council will allocate adequate personnel and resources for carrying out the mission of the Vincentian formation.**

### **Key Indicators:**

- **The National Council has a staff person whose primary responsibility is to provide training and resourcing of Council formation leaders, committees, and formators.**

All or a significant portion of at least one staff person's responsibilities includes advocacy, consultation, networking, communicating, resourcing, research, and training for effective Vincentian formation ministry in the nation. Working with a National commission, advisory committee, or resource network, this person directs and coordinates the various National formation initiatives.

- **The National Council has a Formation Commission.**

Members of this commission serve as a National advisory body in the ministry of Vincentian formation. As such they support and assist the National staff person and the Councils in various projects: the assessment of current needs; the development of a National formation plan; formation for leaders, committees and arrangements; and reviewing and recommending materials. This commission serves as a sounding board and think tank on issues and trends. Membership is drawn from clergy, religious, and from Council leadership, national staff, and others with expertise in this ministry.

- **The National Council maintains current formation resources and makes them available for Council review and use.**

Councils have direct access to formation resources through publishers, bookstores, libraries, conferences, and the internet. The National Council maintains a resource center where materials can be previewed, purchased, or borrowed. The resource center also helps formation leaders and formators learn to use media effectively. All Councils -no matter what their financial situation- have access to quality materials and effective programs.

## **RESOURCES USED TO DEVELOP THIS DOCUMENT INCLUDE:**

- **Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Vatican II)**
- **Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity (U.S. Catholic Conference)**
- **The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Vatican II)**
- **Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us (U.S. Catholic Bishops)**
- **Principles of Adrian van Kaam's Science of Formation Spirituality**
- **The United States Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (2002)**

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